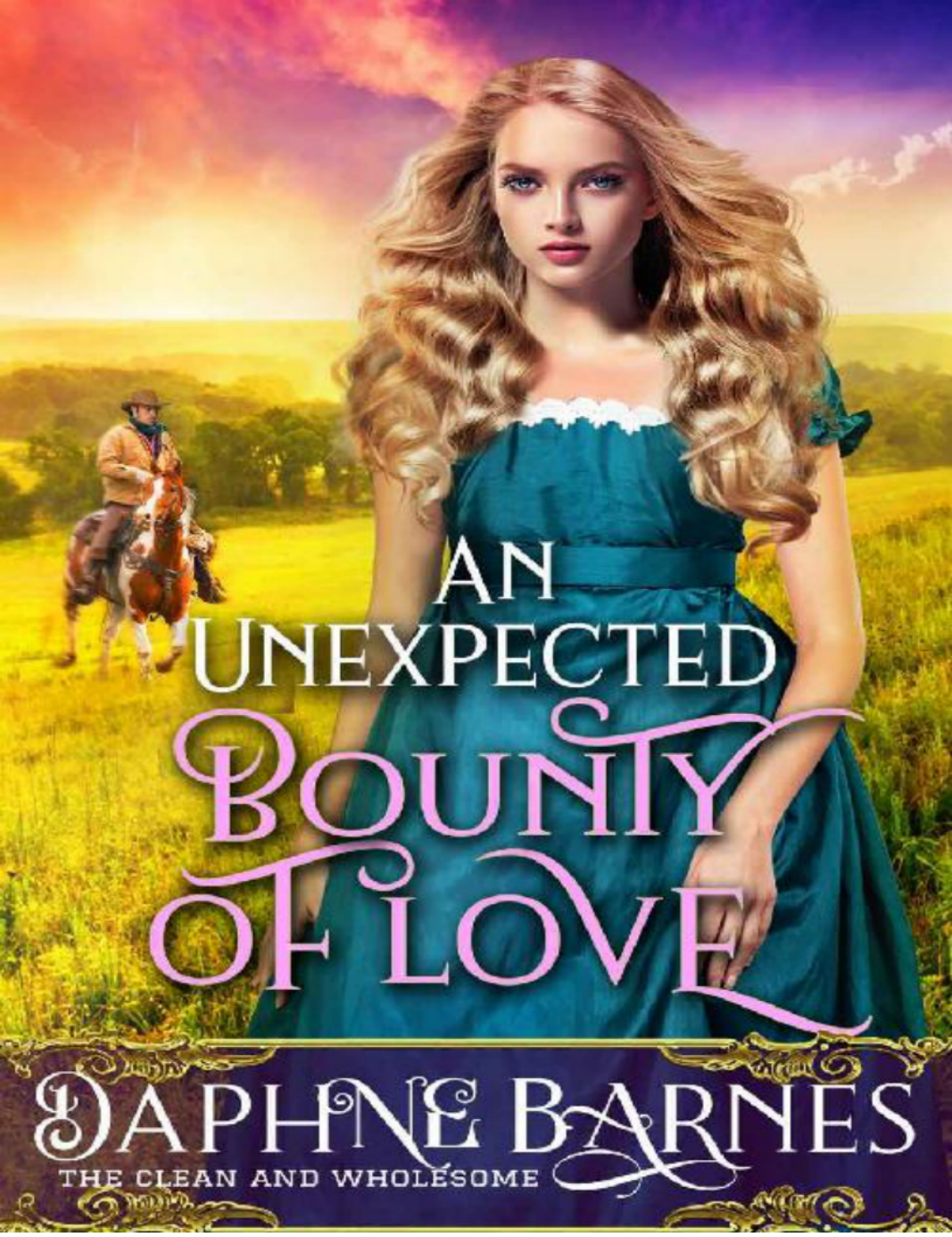

AN
UNEXPECTED
BOUNTY
OF LOVE
DAPHNE BARNES
THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME

# An Unexpected Bounty Of Love

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

Daphne Barnes

## Contents

Copyright
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Epilogue
A Wild Bride For The Wealthy Rancher

**Copyright**

Copyright © 2021 by Daphne Barnes

All Rights Reserved.

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

# 1

Willa snuggled up close to her younger sisters. The sounds of the town outside the window had faded since her father had closed up the general store underneath their cozy home.

Lily twirled one of her blond curls around a finger and then sucked on the tip of it until their father looked up from the book he was reading and glanced at her with a raised brow.

“Pa, please don’t stop reading,” Willa begged.

“It would seem your sister is still hungry. If she has a taste for lovely blond hair, I worry about you two waking up bald tomorrow,” he said, teasing Willa and Jessie, who both giggled at the thought.

“Sorry,” Lily said in a small voice as she released the curl from her lips.

“It’s all right, my dear. But I should probably stop reading for now, anyway. My girls need to get some sleep,” he replied.

A chorus of pleading objections sounded from the three girls, but their father simply smiled and leaned in to kiss their foreheads, starting with Lily, then Jessie, and finally his eldest, Willa. At ten years of age, she was proud to be the biggest of them all.

“Still up?” their mother asked, peeking her head into the room.

“We’re just saying goodnight,” their father said.

“Good. It’s my turn,” she replied, leaning in and kissing them in kind.

Willa watched them blow out the candle and leave the room, her father respectfully allowing her mother through the door first with a loving hand placed on her back.

The bright moon let a decent amount of light through the thinly curtained window, but it wasn’t enough to stop the three girls from falling immediately to sleep. Willa instantly began dreaming of riding horses with her sisters.

~

The scream pierced through the night, startling the three girls to sit up in bed.

Lily immediately began to cry, before they had any answers as to the cause or source of the scream. Jessie looked at Willa with panicked eyes.

“It’s all right, it’s going to be fine. Jessie, you stay here. I’ll go and check with Ma and Pa,” Willa said in as brave a voice as she could muster.

Her sisters nodded a promise that they would stay put and Willa was confident they would do so.

There was a barrage of noise coming from underneath them in the general store, and Willa had a terrible feeling. She rushed from the room and checked in her mother and father’s room, but they weren’t there.

Muffled begging of “No! Please, no!” sounded from under the floor and Willa knew what she had to do next.

Quickly, but quietly, she tiptoed down the stairs and her eyes adjusted to the scene before her. Two dimly lit lamps sat near her mother, who was tied to one of the support beams in the store.

Her father's hands were tied as well, but he was unconscious. Willa gasped, realizing that he had been knocked in the head.

Nearby, a gang of five men were looting the store, taking whatever supplies they could find. She saw a few shovels and some other equipment, while one fella was taking money from the box her mother kept behind the counter.

"C'mon, Hank, we ain't got all night," one of the men said, gruffly. "If we're gonna hit that bank, we need to hurry up before someone hears all the ruckus we've made."

"Someone like her?" Hank asked, pointing behind the first man. Willa froze, realizing that she had been seen. All five men turned, eyeing her without concern.

"Charlie, go on upstairs and see if anyone else is up there. Just tie 'em up. No need to hurt anyone unless we got no other choice," the first man said.

Without needing to be told, the man called Hank walked over to Willa, grabbing her by the hand and pulling her along. She yanked her arm free and ran over to her mother.

"What's the matter with you? Can't even hang onto a little girl?" the first man mocked.

"How was I to know she'd pull free? Don't children know to do what adults say?" Hank asked.

"Apparently not. Ignore her. Let her sit by her ma while we finish up. She ain't going to cause no more trouble," he said.

Willa crouched by her mother, who was widening her eyes and glancing behind Willa, trying to gesture toward something. Willa turned and looked, spotting one of the family's rifles.

She knew what she had to do. Her father had taught her how to safely

use a gun, saying that if they were going to have them around, he wanted all his girls to know how to handle them with care.

But shooting five armed men was different from shooting a rabbit or even a deer—neither of which she'd ever managed to hit.

But the outlaws didn't know that.

As they finished their looting, Willa snuck over and took hold of the rifle. She took a deep breath and put the butt end over her shoulder, steadying the barrel in her hand as best she could, one finger on the trigger.

And then, she stepped forward.

"Whoa! Well, I didn't expect this little turn of events, heh," Hank said, putting his hands up defensively. He looked hesitant, but not necessarily frightened.

The leader of the gang was quiet for a moment, observing the situation, and Willa shifted her stance to aim at him. When she stepped forward once more, the men seemed to take her a little more seriously.

"Little lady, I don't know what you think you're doing, but you can't shoot four grown men," he said.

"You don't know what I can do. My pa has always been cautious to teach his daughters how to use a weapon. That's what we do," she said. "We hunt."

Willa observed the glances between the four men in the room and, at last, the leader gave a nod.

"All right, then. Let's just head on out," he said.

They backed up and Willa continued walking slowly behind them, the gun aimed at them as they filed out past the fabric curtains her family

used during the heat of summer when they wanted the door open for fresh air.

She intended to make sure she saw them all ride off. She needed to know, without a doubt, that they were gone.

Following them outside, Willa watched as they mounted their horses, but she quickly realized the fifth man was still inside. Her heart began to race, worrying for her sisters, but she needed these men to be on their way first.

At last, the leader looked down at her, his eyes slitted, glinting in the moonlight. “You can’t even pull that trigger, can you?” he mocked.

“I c-can,” she said, furious at herself for the stutter.

“Something tells me we didn’t even need to leave, that you wouldn’t dare try to shoot men like us. But, as it happens, we got what we came for. No reason to stick around,” he said.

Willa swallowed her fear, wishing she wasn’t so weak. The leader glanced up above the shop to where the family lived on the upper floor.

“Charlie! What’s taking so long up there?” the man shouted.

“Comin’!” the man called Charlie called back.

Willa heard the sound of his feet racing down the staircase, followed by something toppling and glass shattering. But Charlie raced out and past Willa with eyes wide and curious, yet unafraid as he made for his horse and mounted.

“You makin’ a mess in there?” Hank asked with a laugh.

“Just a lantern…” Charlie replied.

He looked at Willa, his eyes holding a mix of emotions. She saw regret

and apology, but also sinister pride, like a man who was about to prove himself.

The leader's eyes grew wide with satisfaction as he stared past Willa. But she couldn't turn around, not yet. She needed to ensure the men left.

Taking another step forward, Willa was relieved when the men quickly turned their horses around and sped off.

She exhaled in relief, realizing she had been holding her breath. But when she inhaled once more, she smelled it.

Burning wood.

Willa spun around to see the glow from inside the shop. The wood started to crackle and smoke was rising. She heard the faint, panicked groan of her mother, whose mouth was still covered.

Knowing she needed to get inside fast, Willa raced up the steps, determined to put out the fire or, at the very least, get her family out.

Just as she reached the door, the fire lapped along the fabric curtains, sending them up in flames and forcing her to take a step back.

For a moment, she panicked, thinking she was blocked. Willa, however, screwed her courage and used the barrel of the rifle to nudge the curtain aside.

But she was too late.

The beams overhead came crashing down in a pile of charred remains.

"No!" Willa screamed, as others filed from their homes and came racing toward the shop.

Mr. Sanderson, a neighbor and family friend, pulled Willa back just as she lunged forward, ready to charge in and save her family.

“Let me go!” she cried.

But her voice was drowned by the collapse of her home as four lives were lost to the night.

# 2

Theo Walton swiped at the brown curls that flopped on his forehead as he wandered the streets of Stonewood, the small town he'd been staying in for the past few weeks.

He'd finally managed to capture Whip Thomson, a notorious rebel who had been terrorizing farmers in the area for nearly six months.

Normally, he would take this opportunity to rest. He would take the bounty and head back to whichever town had a decent boarding house and an even better saloon, but this time, he wasn't in the mood for that.

This time, he was restless, and the last thing he could think about was settling down for a few days.

It was only a matter of time before someone would come along and tell him he needed to hunt down another criminal. After all, that was what he did best.

"'Scuse me, sir," apologized a man who came rushing out of a shop with a bundle in his arms.

Theo gave him a nod but found that he couldn't bring a smile to his face. Not now, anyway.

Not knowing that the bundle was a Christmas gift, bought last minute, probably for the man's young son or daughter.

Because that was what families did. They scraped together every last penny to bring joy to each other, to put a smile on one another's faces.

Parents did it for children, and children did it for their siblings.

Aside from the fella he'd passed, the main street was rather empty. Theo continued wandering through the township and past a few homes where he could glance in the windows.

The front rooms glowed from the dim light of candles as mothers presented gifts or fathers smiled faintly when the meal was revealed at the table.

An ache and his chest and a pit in his stomach, Theo felt utterly hollow. He wondered how it had come to be this way. How had he grown to be separated from this joy by a window?

As a child, he'd enjoyed Christmas with his brother and his parents. He'd loved the thrill of the meal, with a great big bird on the table and the grandest array of his mother's garden harvest from the year. Potatoes and winter squash and corn, the aroma would fill the home with a blissful comfort.

So much had changed since those days. Theo wasn't sure how to handle the reality that he had lost it all, that he could never get it back.

No matter how desperately he longed to return to the life he'd lived with his family, it was gone.

Theo had been inseparable from his brother. He'd believed that nothing could keep them apart.

Even when things began to change, he was sure they would find a way to be close again, to keep things the way they always were. But it was a fool's notion to believe that they could remain in that perfect life forever.

Theo had no one now. Painful though it was to admit, he'd said goodbye to those days, and he couldn't go back now. There was too much standing in the way.

He decided not to dwell on these memories. It would only lead to sadness. It was far better that he head back to the boarding house and try to get on with his life.

When he reached the wooden building, Theo could hear laughter and merriment from inside. He pushed the door open, ready to go upstairs, when he saw the dining room full, everyone turning to him with welcoming eyes.

"Ah! There's the man who just saved our town from Whip Thomson. Fellas, make room!" ordered Mr. Simpson, the innkeeper.

"Thank you, Mr. Simpson, but I need to get some rest," Theo said, politely declining the invitation.

"Nonsense. We're about to exchange gifts. Mrs. Simpson and I got everyone a little something and we certainly want to show you our gratitude after all you've done for us.

"Please, have a seat!" he said again.

Theo didn't want to appear rude, but he simply couldn't bring himself to join them. He'd had enough memories haunting him for one night and sitting with the others would only serve to make it worse.

No matter how badly he wanted to appear as a peaceable, friendly patron, he just couldn't.

"I am so grateful for the offer, but I fear that I really must refuse," he said. "I'm not feeling well and I wouldn't want to make you all ill."

The lie ached in his teeth, but it was the only way to avoid offending anybody. Mr. Simpson nodded in understanding, but his eyes shone with disappointment.

“Very well. I’ll have Mrs. Simpson bring you up a plate, along with the little gift.”

“Much obliged, Mr. Simpson,” Theo said, tipping his hat.

It felt much cooler in the boarding house. Although the sun had begun to dip down to the horizon, it was still a warm evening, and Theo was glad to be inside where he might have a chance to rest up and make some decisions about his next steps.

While he’d been in Stonewood, a part of him had felt the warmth of the townspeople while another part of him felt the wariness of not getting too close. He’d been around most of them for weeks by this point, greeting some in the hall, smiling at others.

A few of the men were in town on business and others had planned to stay for just a night on their way to California to try for gold, but had wound up delaying their travels simply because of the warmth of the town and of the inn’s proprietor.

Theo leaned back in a chair by the little table in his room and lit a candle. He ignored the glow of it in the glass as he stared out the window, looking out over the town once more.

Indeed, this was a comfortable place to be, but that was all the more reason to leave. He’d known these people for weeks, but he didn’t truly know them, right? That was a luxury he couldn’t afford.

Certainly not after what had happened.

A knock at the door startled Theo and he sat upright, drawing his pistol in a flash.

Realizing it was probably just Mrs. Simpson with the food, he exhaled and let his shoulders relax before pasting a smile on his face. He would need to be friendly when he greeted her.

More than likely, he would leave in the morning and never come

back.

# 3

All eyes turned to the woman walking into the saloon, her head held high, hair piled under a tan hat that was barely feminine enough to pass for a lady's.

Her dress was simple and matched in color, failing to conceal the rugged boots underneath.

Willa had a fine figure and the men leered at her, the only woman in the place who clearly wasn't a madam. She had a commanding presence, one she had crafted over many years of battling against her fears and anxieties.

Nevertheless, her skin crawled when she saw the expressions on some of those faces.

A couple of men in the corner merely scowled at her, and two fellas near the bar counter were whispering and laughing as they stared, but most of the men were simply predictable.

They looked at her with expectation, taking attention away from the grimacing madams who suddenly had to compete for the attention of their clientele.

Willa was certainly accustomed to this by now. Despite her years as a bounty hunter, and the fact that she had a stronger record of success than most of her peers, she still had to fight twice as hard to get a fraction of the respect.

That was just how things went for a woman in her line of work—not that there were all that many.

“Well, you sure are a pretty little thing,” one man mumbled as he walked past her.

He reeked of spirits and body odor, a sharp tang that would have caused a weaker woman to retch. But Willa prided herself on her strength.

She didn’t respond, having no intention of engaging this man or allowing him to get to her. But she sensed his frustration at her lack of interest and when he grasped her wrist, Willa had no choice other than to show him the mistake he had made.

With a simple twist of her arm and a grasp from her other hand, Willa quickly had the man locked into a hunched position. His bulbous face turned red from the straining effort to get free of her.

“Wh-let me go!” he shouted.

“Would you have let me go if I’d asked?” Willa inquired with a calm note in her voice.

The man made a few flustered noises as he tried to decide on a response. Willa held him firmly and waited.

“Yes. Yes, all right? I would have let you go,” he said.

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“I don’t know, lady. What’s the matter with you?” he demanded, attempting to straighten his back.

“If I let you go, you must never grasp a woman again. If you do, she just might humiliate you in front of all your friends as I have done.

“It’s very simple, really. It doesn’t take strength, but stability,” she

told him.

“All right! I won’t touch a woman ever again, if that’s what you want,” he relented.

With that, Willa released him and the man tripped over his feet in an effort to get away, having to steady himself against a chair so he didn’t fall over. Red-faced and angry, he rushed out the saloon doors as Willa watched him go.

She turned back to look for her destination and all the other heads went down. No one would meet her gaze. She was all right with that.

This had certainly not been the impression she wanted to make when she came into the saloon, but she hadn’t been expecting someone to be so bold as to simply grab her like that. And there was no chance Willa would allow any man to behave that way.

She was at the saloon for a reason and she couldn’t get distracted. If anything, she had a mild hope that she would be shown more respect now that they’d seen her stand up against that brute, but something deep down told Willa she wouldn’t be so lucky.

More often than not, the men in saloons didn’t care how strong she was. They still saw her the same as they saw every other female around.

Nevertheless, she knew how to get information and where to go for it. Making her way directly to the poker table, Willa was sure this was the right spot.

She took her seat and looked at the three other men at the table. Every last one of them looked away when she caught them staring. It was evident they didn’t quite know what to make of her.

“That’s just what we need,” the dealer mumbled, “a crazy woman here to ruin the game.”

“Ruining it is not my intention,” she replied at a normal volume.

The men looked up, surprised that she wasn’t meek in demeanor, nor was she coy about her purpose there. It was one of the many moments in Willa’s life that she’d had to deal with false expectations from others.

“That so?” the dealer asked with sarcasm.

“It certainly is. You see, I know a thing or two about card games, and I’m sure you’ll find me a worthy opponent,” she said.

“No offense, ma’am, it was real fun watching you toss Todd Fink out on his keister, but you wouldn’t be the first woman to humiliate him. The rest of us are a bit more… capable.

“And I don’t think your odds are great playing against these fellas,” the dealer warned.

Cocking her head to the side, Willa paused and looked him long and hard in the eye, waiting for his inevitable twitch of discomfort. Once he couldn’t hold her gaze anymore, he shifted and cleared his throat.

“Well, if you’re up for playing, we’ll go right on ahead and let you join. You do need to be aware though, miss, that these fellas won’t go easy on you just because you’re a lady.

“They’ll take money from anyone who’s offering,” he said.

“Fine by me. As a matter of fact, I’m here to give you all a challenge. And if I win, it isn’t money that I want from you,” she said.

Each of the fellas snickered and Willa gave a sly grin at their mocking. There were, indeed, moments when her youthful, feminine appearance did give her an advantage.

This was one of those times.

Here they were, thinking she was just a brazen female, otherwise like any other. Soon enough, they would come to find that Willa was something else entirely.

“Well, little darlin’, what is it you do want?” the dealer asked, curious at her declaration.

“Information,” Willa replied.

“Information? If you’re wanting to know the location of the lady’s facility, it’s marked outside by hollyhocks just like anywhere else you might go,” he said, crassly.

Although the mention of the outhouse was supposed to offend Willa, she let it slide, aware that he was just trying to get rid of her. These men had no idea who they were dealing with, but she intended to show them.

“Well, that’s awfully kind of you to let me know, but that isn’t exactly what I was wondering. In fact, the information I need is a good deal more important.

“Something tells me plenty of men around here can tell me what I want to know, but I expect I won’t get it unless those men are given a choice between telling me or paying up,” she said.

“All right, out with it. What’s this information you so desperately need to know?” he asked, fed up with her already.

“I need to know the whereabouts of Wild Buck.”

At the mention of the name, every voice went silent, the piano stopped playing, and all eyes turned to Willa once again.

The quiet lingered for only a moment before the dealer started to laugh, leaning his head back for a moment and then looking at Willa again and shaking it in disbelief at her gumption.

“Wild Buck? You wouldn’t happen to be his doe, would you?” the dealer asked.

“Never,” she replied in disgust. “I don’t marry criminals, I hunt them. Wild Buck just happens to be the next bounty on my list.”

“A bounty hunter?” one of the men scoffed. As soon as Willa looked at him, he turned away again, his cheeks turning red upon being caught by her.

Willa turned back to the dealer and waited for his final decision whether to let her in the game. She was dependent upon him now, much to her chagrin.

“Well, I sure haven’t met one like you lately. All right, little lady, if you’re bold enough to make that demand, I suppose you’re bold enough to play with these here fellas.

“But you had best be ready for them, because they are bulls,” he warned.

“I’ve found the best way to tenderize a bull is to roast its hide over an open flame. I don’t expect this to be all that different,” Willa remarked calmly.

The dealer slapped his thigh as the other men at the table glanced nervously between themselves. But when another man stepped up to the table, Willa found herself looking up at someone quite different from the others.

His amber eyes were striking against a ruggedly handsome face. Brown curls escaped his hat and although he was gruff and masculine, there was something inherently angelic about him.

Willa blinked and tried to focus on the table in front of her, having no desire to get distracted by a man. All she truly wanted was to focus on getting the information she needed.

The rest was unimportant.

“This seat free?” he asked with one hand on the empty chair beside her.

Although his question was directed at the dealer, Willa felt the man’s eyes upon her and she had to fight against the blush that worked its way into her cheeks.

“Sure. Looks like we got two new folks tonight, but I’ve got a feeling neither of you are quite up to the task,” the dealer said.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” the man said. “You see, I’m pretty motivated. And seeing as how this fine lady and I are here for the same information, I think it’s important that I step in.”

At that, Willa looked back up at the man, her eyes wide with surprise and discomfort. Who was this man? What was he thinking? And why was he looking for information on Wild Buck?

“I beg your pardon?” she asked.

“I think you heard me, miss.”

“And why is that?” Willa challenged.

“Reasons aren’t important. Rather, I think the important thing to note here is that we’ve both come to the same spot looking for the same thing.

“And at the end of this game, only one of us will leave with what we need. The other… the other is going to leave empty handed.”

A thrill ran down Willa’s spine as the man looked at her with those amber-brown eyes. His quiet confidence unnerved her.

She could take the average fella in a game of cards, especially one drinking at a saloon. But this cowboy was different.

Something about him told her she had better be careful. If she let her guard down for even a moment, she wouldn't get what she needed to find Wild Buck.

No matter what, she couldn't let Amber Eyes win.

# 4

Theo sat beside the intriguing woman, hoping he could keep himself interested in the game long enough not to get too distracted by her.

He took off his hat and set it on an empty chair beside him, glancing at her again. She kept that sand-colored hat atop her head, a sad-looking silk rose flopped upon the brim of it.

She clearly wanted to blend in with the surroundings of the dusty trail outside, but he imagined it would be hard for a woman like her not to stand out.

The blond hair that peeked out from underneath her hat was a lovely shade of gold and her deep brown eyes were rather striking.

Like every other man in the saloon, he'd noted her lovely figure, but he was one of the few who managed not to leer at her like a fool.

For now, he needed to focus on winning the game and ensuring that this woman didn't get in his way. He'd never met a female bounty hunter, but he'd met enough strong women in his life that he wasn't overly surprised.

Still, he needed to win this game. He couldn't let her get the best of him. It was of vital importance that he win and get the information about Wild Buck.

Theo had been after Wild Buck for years now and he couldn't let a

lady like her get him. It wouldn't be just. Especially when she was likely to just track him down and kill him.

That was the last thing Theo could stand for.

"All right, here we go," the dealer said, shuffling the cards and looking between the players. Theo sensed the man's suspicion as he glanced between Theo and the woman.

Of course, they would garner suspicion. After all, they were the new people in town. No one knew him, and he had gathered that no one knew her, either.

"You know how to play cards, miss?" Theo asked as the cards were dealt.

"Would I be here if I didn't?"

"I've seen ladies do a great many things when they felt the need to prove themselves. But you don't need to prove anything. Seems to me that you are quite confident in your abilities, whatever they might be," he said.

"Then why would you ask if I know how to play cards?" the woman asked.

"Because I've also seen men and women both who feel confident about things they don't know," he replied.

She narrowed her eyes at him and it was clear she understood his meaning. This wasn't a conversation about cards at all.

This was about hunting. This was about finding one's bounty and bringing them in, dead or alive.

"Regardless of the sort of folks you've met, I can guarantee you that I don't get myself into trouble over false confidence. I leave that to my male counterparts.

“I find it takes a whole lot more brain power to succeed in this country than the strength men find in their… other regions,” she said, shocking Theo with her vague yet crass suggestion.

For a moment, he said nothing, taken aback by her words but also impressed by her confidence. She clearly knew that men thought of her only as a female as opposed to as a person.

Theo wondered if she chose to see men only as men so she could stand against that vulnerability.

Sure, men in their line of work spoke pretty rough, but a woman? Theo wasn’t accustomed to it, but it somehow made him respect her more—even if he felt uncomfortable with that fact.

Trying to hide his curiosity, Theo looked back at his cards. He wondered how she’d become a bounty hunter when that was hardly suitable for a woman. What could have led her into this sort of work?

“Miller?” the dealer asked, giving the first man a chance to call.

The man looked around the table and scanned each face. Theo glanced at his cards and gave a nervous twitch of the nose, something he frequently did as a false tell when he was in a new town where people didn’t know him.

The man called Miller looked at him for an extended moment and Theo didn’t hold his gaze. With smug arrogance, Miller threw a few more coins into the pile.

“All right, fellas—sorry,” the dealer said, cynically glancing at the woman. “I didn’t mean to only include the menfolk, darlin’. Hope you don’t mind too much.”

“No reason to apologize. Soon enough you’ll make it up to me by telling me where Wild Buck is at,” she replied.

Theo scoffed. “Well, that is the least ladylike threat I’ve ever heard.

What's the matter with you? Don't you know how to talk to a man properly?"

"What? With respect?" she retorted.

"Exactly. Respect," Theo said.

"And how much respect was I shown when I walked in here? Hmm? How much respect have men shown me?" she challenged him.

Theo sighed and shook his head, knowing she was right. She'd already been grabbed, mocked, and laughed at since walking into the saloon. No one had taken her all that seriously.

But he'd been a fool to get lured into an argument. It was far more important that he focus on the game at hand instead of being drawn in like this.

"Moving on," the dealer grumbled.

When it came around to Theo, he analyzed the cards in his hand. It wasn't a perfect hand, but darn near close. He knew he stood a real shot at winning even without a change of cards.

Nevertheless, he went ahead and drew one.

An ace.

Theo refrained from grinning, although this was exactly what he needed. The ace of hearts was in his hand and he knew he had the game. All he needed to do was get rid of the rest of the players.

Especially the woman.

It was her turn next and Theo saw the wince when she looked at her hand. There was an underlying expression of confusion, cleverly hidden by bravado.

There it was—the truth. She didn't know a thing about this game. All of this was just wishful thinking, an attempt to let luck guide her fate.

Theo's shoulders relaxed when he realized she was all talk and there was no chance she would actually win this thing.

He was going to get his information, and he would reach Wild Buck before she had a chance to do anything to jeopardize that.

"What do you want to do, miss?" the dealer asked after she hesitated for a moment.

Finding her courage, the woman drew another card from the deck and Theo watched her analyze it for a moment as she compared it with the others in her hand.

He wasn't worried anymore. It was much easier for Theo to play the game and work on fooling the other players when he didn't have to worry about them in return.

And once the first two fellas bowed out, Theo didn't have anything more to worry about.

"Tommy?" the dealer asked, looking at the only other man left at the table.

"I don't trust them two," he replied.

"Neither do I, but you gotta decide if you still want to play a hand," the dealer said.

Tommy looked up at Theo and the woman, clearly trying to choose what he ought to do next. When he looked at the woman, he seemed ready to keep playing, but when he looked at Theo, he didn't seem so sure.

"I think he's bluffing. Seems to me that he's trying to look weak so I'll put more in the ante, but he said he doesn't want nothing but

information, just like the woman," he said.

"Tommy, doggonit, are you gonna play or not? You don't go complaining to me just because you can't trust your own instincts on a game.

"Either play or quit, it's up to you. But don't go around with all this nonsense, waiting for me to make up your mind for you," the dealer scolded.

Tommy leaned back, giving it a moment longer before he shook his head and threw down his cards.

"I fold," he said. "I don't trust that fella. The woman was scary at first. Now I just feel like a fool for thinking she had a clue what she was doing, but that cowboy? He's got some kind of trick up his sleeve."

The dealer rolled his eyes and let out a sigh of frustration.

"Go on and get, Tommy. I don't need you ruining everything for the next round," he said.

As Tommy ran off, Theo turned to the woman and looked at her with a glint of compassion in his eye.

"You know, you can fold any time," he said.

"Why would I do that?" she asked.

"Because there's no shame in it," he replied. "I know I teased you at the start, but you really don't do a great job of bluffing. See, you want to pretend you have a good hand so the others are intimidated and fold."

"Then why have you been pretending you have a bad hand?" she asked.

Theo paused, surprised that she recognized his lies. He didn't know

what to make of her just yet. “What makes you think I’m pretending?”

“Because of your real tell. You fake that little nose twitch, but what people don’t see is the shift in your left eyebrow. Your curls nearly hide it and most others probably don’t even see it, but it’s there,” she said.

“And what do you know of tells and lying about a bad hand?” he challenged.

“I know you pretended to have a bad hand because you wanted the men to stay in the game longer. You thought that by keeping them here, they would eventually start talking, maybe share a little bit about Wild Buck.

“But once they started to fold, you weren’t worried. You knew you were about to win and you’d get all the information anyway,” she said, as though reading his mind entirely.

Theo stuttered for a moment, ready to refute her, but was unable to come up with a lie quickly enough.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I understand. It can be very important at times to keep people at the table. For instance, sometimes I try to keep them around so I can learn about them.

“Take this game, for example. I wanted to make sure you stayed at the table so I could learn your true tell. Now that I have, now that I know something more about my competitor, I have no use for you.”

Without another word, the woman laid her cards on the table and Theo choked on his gasp.

“And we have a winner,” the dealer mumbled.

The royal flush stared up at Theo, mocking his four of a kind. He’d been so close. He really thought he was going to win. How had she managed to fool him? How had she taken him in so easily?

“A royal flush? Are you kidding me? You cheated. I don’t know how, but you cheated,” he insisted.

“Come now, no need for that. Just take your loss gracefully, the way a true gentleman would,” she said.

Theo glared, but she smirked and pulled a coin from her purse. Flicking it at him, she winked.

“A little something for your troubles. Good luck next time.”

Speechless, he watched her follow the dealer through the saloon and to the back room behind the bar, where she would get her information about Wild Buck. With narrowed eyes and a furious pulse, he was determined not to let her get away with this.

And yet, he was quite struck with amazement. She’d impressed him deeply and Theo couldn’t believe what had just taken place.

He’d never imagined a woman could get the best of him like that. Who was she? How had she just beaten him with such ease?

None of this had been expected, and Theo was not only angry at the woman, he was furious at himself as well. He should have seen this coming. He ought to have known what she was doing.

Wasn’t he excellent at understanding people? How could he miss this?

Now, he had put himself into a terrible position where he was risking the loss of the most important bounty of his life. If she reached Wild Buck before him, he would never forgive himself.

But aside from following her once she left the room, he didn’t have a whole lot of other options. Now that he’d ruined the card game, he had no chance of getting information from the other players, and the dealer certainly didn’t seem like the kind of man to take pity on someone like him.

It was too late for now. He'd have to find another way of getting what he wanted.

But Theo had always been determined and, in that moment, he was certain he would find a way.

# 5

"That enough for you?" the dealer asked Willa, his tone less than friendly. It was clear he wanted her gone and she was absolutely ready to oblige him.

"It sure was. Thank you for that. And just remember, if I get there and it turns out you were lying to me all along, I'll come right back here and you and I will be exchanging words," she warned.

"Despite my better judgment, I think you've frightened me enough that I'm going to do what you say. Enough now, get on with it and find him.

"The longer you stay here, the worse off I'll be," he said, ushering her out of the way.

Willa left the back room and made her way into the saloon once again. She was in a hurry, but she needed to land eyes on that cowboy first and make sure he didn't try to follow her.

She had an awful feeling he might try to step in and steal her bounty —something she wasn't about to let happen.

But as she peered around the room, Willa realized he was nowhere to be seen. A small wave of panic flooded her chest, but she pushed it away.

After all, she didn't want to see him, anyway. It was better that they didn't have to interact again. It wouldn't do her any good to see those

amber eyes.

The card dealer had told her that the Cottonwood Saloon was a forty-minute ride west. Willa hoped she would make it there in thirty.

She was a fast rider with a fast horse, after all. She had nothing to worry about.

Willa made her way into the road and headed to the livery stables where her horse was waiting for her. She continually glanced around for any sign of the other bounty hunter, but she didn't see him and figured there was no reason to be so paranoid.

"There he is," Willa said, reaching her steed. She rubbed his nose as she came around and then quickly saddled him for another trip.

"You gave him plenty of food and water?" she asked the groom, who was quite focused on another horse in the mix.

"Sure did. He's awful fond of apples, isn't he?" the groom asked.

"Aren't most horses?" Willa asked with a laugh.

She led her steed out of the stall and handed the groom a purse of coins. He smiled even before opening it to check that the full payment had been made.

Willa didn't have time to waste so, once she was back out onto the road, she mounted up, pulled a bandana over her face, and immediately bolted from Stonewood out west to Cottonwood.

"That's it, boy," she said gently, easing her horse into a race that would have to serve them until they arrived.

With a glance behind her, Willa was relieved to be saying farewell to Stonewood and even happier to know she'd made it out without incident.

No sign of the cowboy, and that was the most important part. She didn't need the competition. She only needed the bounty.

Wild Buck had done enough damage and now it was up to Willa to clean it up. Once she captured him, she'd be able to turn him over to the marshals. Then she could claim her money.

The only question now was whether or not she'd be handing him over alive. After all, a man like Wild Buck probably wouldn't go down without a fight and Willa was certainly up to the task.

She knew what it was like to fight a man like that. She was quick on the draw and her limber frame gave her an advantage, but that didn't mean she wouldn't need to be careful.

As she rode, Willa stuffed a hand into one of the pockets of her sack and pulled out the wanted poster for Wild Buck. Despite the bumpiness of the ride, she unfolded the paper and tried to study it once more.

The inked image wasn't perfectly clear, but it depicted the man's almond-shaped eyes, his full beard, and the nasty scar on the right side of his face. With those three characteristics, she was confident she'd manage to find him.

But that was only if the dealer had given her good information. If it turned out the man was a rat, that he'd only been saying something to get her to leave, she had bigger problems on her hands.

After all, she didn't have time to waste. This was more important than just getting a bounty. This was about catching an awful criminal and putting him behind bars where he belonged.

She wondered why, if the dealer had known where Wild Buck was at, he wouldn't have turned him in for the reward. It was a huge bounty.

Were men like him really so scared of Wild Buck that they weren't even willing to take him to the sheriff? That kind of fear had no place

in this world.

It was no way to live. Imagine having that level of cowardice.

From a distance, Willa saw the small town of Cottonwood. It sure looked like a small town, anyway, but she imagined it held as much crime and as many secrets as any other.

Still, as she spurred her steed onward, Willa knew she was about to take down a man who was tearing another town apart.

She reached the town's limits and slowed her horse. It wasn't easy to blend in even on the best of days, but when she was riding this hard and fast, it was hopeless.

All Willa wanted to do was get her work taken care of, but as she dismounted, she saw the horrified stares of mothers with their children and the intrigue of the men.

No one could quite understand her.

But Willa led her horse to the livery stables, ignoring whatever eyes followed her. She found the groom and gave him a nod.

"Well, howdy there, ma'am," he said, looking her up and down with confusion.

"Good day, sir," she replied. "I don't expect to be here long, but if you could look after him? He's ridden very hard just now."

"I promise I'll take as good a care of him as I do my own son," he said with a grin.

"Very nice to know," she replied with a polite smile of her own. "And would you be so kind as to point me toward the Cottonwood Saloon?"

"Cottonwood Saloon? Uh… miss, I don't know what you plan on going there for, but it's a rough group of fellas that frequents that place.

“And unless you’re looking to go toe to toe with our soiled doves, I don’t expect you’re going to find it all that welcoming,” he warned.

“Yes, I understand that. As it happens, I have other business there and I don’t expect any trouble,” she said.

“Whatever you think you’re going to find there, I can assure you that it will come hand in hand with trouble. They’re mostly criminals in there and if you plan to confront one of them, be prepared for the others to jump to his defense,” he said.

Willa knew exactly what to expect. A few of the men would leap up to help Wild Buck, but some man in the corner, one who had been burned by the outlaw in the past, would come to her aid.

He might even, literally, stab the others in the back just to get his revenge. Otherwise, Wild Buck might not have all that many friends around here.

After all, this wasn’t his town. It was just his latest drink hole.

Still, she knew to be prepared for the worst. If every man, woman, and barkeep jumped to Wild Buck’s aid, Willa could easily slip out of the place.

She was agile enough for that and, once out in the street, no criminal would risk coming after her. It was too dangerous for them and they might get caught.

“Thank you for the advice. I’m still quite comfortable and determined to go to the saloon. Would you mind pointing me in the right direction? It would save me some time,” she said.

He sighed, clearly not thinking it was a wise idea, but finally relented.

“All right, then. It’s just three blocks down from here and across the road. You’ll see the sign. It’s pretty large and the music just spills right out of that place.

“You might even see a drunk or two doing the same,” he said.

“Thank you. That is precisely what I needed to know,” she told him, handing him the reins of her steed and turning her heels to make her way to the saloon.

“I really hope you know what you’re doing,” the man said, making one last effort to protect her.

“I do. I’ve been doing this for years. Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I don’t know how to look after myself.

“In fact, when others assume less of me, it only gives me an advantage,” she said with a shrug and a confident smile.

“Oh, it’s not just about you being a woman. Sure, that concerns me and all, but that’s one small part of it.

“The truth is, I don’t think there’s a man in all the west who could take on those fellas any better than you could. I’m just saying… be on your guard.”

She gave him a polite nod to acknowledge his words, but nothing was going to stop her. She couldn’t settle back and refuse the duty she’d been given.

Willa slid her hand along the waistband of her skirts and flipped open the pouch she kept hidden by the layers, making sure the pistol was accessible for a quick draw.

This wasn’t going to be a simple capture. She had to be sure she was ready at every moment. Otherwise, she would find herself stuck, caught up in the chaos of the saloon. She had to be alert.

It was the only choice she had.

Loud, boisterous music did, indeed, spill out onto the road. Willa heard the saloon before she saw it.

But soon enough, she realized all the noise was coming from the wooden building with the huge sign painted red over the swinging doors.

The Cottonwood Saloon.

She took a deep breath and narrowed her eyes. With a quick glance down the lane, she spotted the sheriff's office.

It was about thirty yards from the saloon—she'd need to have a man like Wild Buck bound pretty well to avoid him escaping on the way.

But she could do it.

With everything worked out in her mind, there was no time left to lose. Willa rushed for the saloon and burst through the doors.

It took only a flash for her eyes to adjust to the dim light in the place and peer through the fog. With only a dozen or so men in the place, she quickly spotted the fella at the poker table with a beard and a long scar along his cheek.

Her heart skipped a beat. All this time and effort, all this work she had put into hunting him down—and at last, she had finally found him.

Willa stepped forward and opened her mouth to charge in and capture him, but before she had a chance, the back door of the saloon suddenly flew open.

Another man dressed as a bounty hunter stepped in. Despite the hat and bandana meant to shroud his identity, Willa knew exactly who it was.

There was no doubt in her mind that Amber Eyes had found some way of getting the information and arriving at the same time she did. How he had done it, she couldn't imagine.

But she was impressed.

And although she hated to admit it to herself, Willa was a little bit excited to see him again. Moreover, she was excited by the thought that someone was a truly worthy competitor.

Even if he'd cheated somehow, she wondered how he had managed to get this far and to make her efforts look average.

Still, Willa wasn't going to let him take this from her. She had a job to do.

Whatever he thought he could get away with, he was about to discover that Willa would not be stopped once she put her mind to something.

This was her chance to prove she was just as capable as any man.

# 6

Theo clung to the gun in his hand. There she was again. The stunning woman. Of course she'd managed to get here before he could, but he'd made an effort to avoid that, anyway.

After realizing that he was about to lose his one and only chance, Theo had grown desperate. He'd raced out after the other men who'd played poker with them and made it clear that they could either help him out or they would face his anger.

It hadn't taken much to get them to buckle. A drunk man was usually a coward hiding behind bravado.

They told him that if Wild Buck wasn't in Stonewood, he'd be in Cottonwood. Turned out, that was good information.

As soon as Theo reached the town, dropping his horse at the livery stables where he saw the woman's horse, he glanced down the road and saw her just as she reached the saloon.

A small part of him hoped he could sneak in and take his bounty without seeing her, but that had been a fool's errand. Now, here he was, in a face-off with the woman.

And then, there was Wild Buck.

Seated at the poker table, his eyes glancing between Theo and the woman, it was when he looked back to Theo that the real anxiety filled them.

Theo took a deep breath, knowing how hard this would be. After all these years chasing down Wild Buck, after all the trials he had been through to capture him, Theo couldn't lose this chance.

He couldn't let the woman ruin this by shooting the outlaw.

But as he observed the situation, the woman seemed to make up her own mind, rushing to put herself between Theo and Wild Buck, clearly determined not to let him get her bounty.

And the look Theo saw in her eyes was one of sheer determination. She wasn't going to let this criminal get away. To her, it didn't matter if Wild Buck showed up at the sheriff's dead or alive.

As long as he didn't escape, she seemed willing to do just about anything.

"Wait!" Theo shouted.

Everything in the room was still and only the woman moved, craning her neck to glance back at Theo while her pistol was trained on Wild Buck.

"Just wait. Don't do what you're about to do. We can talk about this. I'm a reasonable man and I'm sure you're a reasonable woman," he said.

"Get lost," she ordered, focusing back on her target. "Wild Buck, it's time to take you in and face your—"

Theo stormed up to her. He wasn't going to back down. "I will not get lost. Give this up. You don't have any idea what you're dealing with here. Lay down your gun and back off," he growled.

The woman scoffed and shook her head.

"I don't know who you think you are, but just because you're a man and I'm not doesn't mean I have to listen to you. I have been working

my whole life for this," she said, her eyes narrowed on her bounty.

"This has nothing to do with being a man or a woman. I don't know anything about you and I'm sure you probably are just as tough as you seem, but I can't let you do this."

"You can't stop me."

Theo held his gun steady in his hand, but it was pointed to the ground. He didn't want to have to use it and he certainly couldn't use it on another bounty hunter.

That would just be an outright murder so he couldn't claim the rights to the money for Buck. He had no choice but to appeal to her senses.

"I know you think you're doing the right thing, but you're not," he said.

"Will you just leave me alone? I got him, fair and square. You may be greedy enough to try and fight me on this, but I am taking this man in to the sheriff whether you like it or not.

"And if he fights me, I'll take him to the sheriff with a bullet between his eyes," she added, her finger pressed against the trigger, ready to squeeze the moment she had an excuse.

Theo looked up at Wild Buck. Of course the man was going to fight her. He didn't know how to come peaceably.

And when Theo looked at Wild Buck again, he saw the workings of the man's mind, saw he was planning an escape of some sort.

This was not going to go down well.

The other men in the saloon had backed off and Theo heard a few leave. More than likely, some of them had bounties on their heads, as well.

If he could make her realize the fortune to be had, maybe all of this would settle.

“Listen, I think we can come to an understanding,” he began. “I know you’re here to take down a dirty, rotten criminal.

‘That’s a great sense of justice you have there. But I’ve been hunting him for a long time and it would mean an awful lot if you would let me have him.

“Look around you. Think of all the men who were here a moment ago. You can have every last one of them. Take them in, get your justice. You would collect a far greater bounty than just this fella.

“I’ll even help if you aren’t able to handle all of them. What is it, eight? Nine? I can guarantee you that at least half of them have a bounty on their heads,” he reasoned.

She glared at him for just a moment, long enough for Theo to see her suspicion.

He didn’t want her thinking too much about his need to take down Wild Buck. He just needed her to think about getting all the others to the sheriff.

“We can fight over this one man, or I can take him and you can take all the others,” he continued.

“Why are you so obsessed with Wild Buck?” she asked in annoyance.

Theo chewed his lip before he could form an answer. He had to be careful about what he said, but he also needed her to understand the importance of this.

Moreover, he needed to do so without getting lost in those deep-set brown eyes of hers.

“For the sake of my family…” he finally said.

For the briefest flash, he saw compassion in her gaze. Hoping he could appeal to her sensitive side, he let the words hang in the air, leaving her to make assumptions of her own.

Wild Buck shifted ever so slightly, evidently looking for his chance to break free but wanting to be smart about it. To Theo, it seemed Buck had grown more cautious since their last meeting.

It made sense. After all, Wild Buck was so determined to not be caught that he had every reason to be careful.

No matter how desperate he was to be free, he needed to be clever in how he maintained that freedom.

Besides, Buck knew Theo would never let him get away with hurting a woman. That was of some solace to Theo in that moment. At least he didn't have to worry about the woman's safety.

"What do you say? Are you willing to let me take him in? As I said, I'll give you every other man still in here," he said, looking around at the men who were getting antsy but couldn't reach either door without going past Theo and the woman.

"Sorry, fella, but I'm here for a reason. If you want the others taken in, you go right on ahead. I'll get your justice," she replied.

Theo let out a hiss of irritation. Why was this woman so stubborn? What was her problem? Such a waste of intrigue on someone so unlikeable.

"Are you going to kill him?" Theo asked, growing desperate.

"Only if he gives me a reason to," she said. "I can't tell you how much I hope he gives me a reason to."

Theo's gut twisted. He didn't know what to say to that. Was she really so bloodthirsty? Or had Wild Buck done something to harm her? Was this personal?

Surely it was all just a misunderstanding and she needed to cool off for a moment.

“Please—”

“I told you to get lost,” the woman said, turning to him with rage in her expression. “Why won’t you just leave me alone?

“If you keep making me angry, I’m going to shoot him just to get this over with, just to get you away from me.”

“No! Don’t do that,” he said, trying not to beg.

She was ready to shoot, but Theo couldn’t let that happen. He needed answers from Buck. This wasn’t just a bounty for him, either. He had to know the truth.

He had made promises and he intended to keep them. For now, the promise was that he would get answers.

This was one bounty that he would not give up. No matter his opponent, no matter how beautiful she was, no matter how determined she happened to be, Theo couldn’t let this one go.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you need to get out of my way or you’ll be the one to take the bullet,” she said, her tone only mildly threatening.

“I can’t let you out of here with him and I can’t let you shoot that man,” Theo said.

“And what are you gonna do about it?” she asked.

Theo paused for a moment, considering his options. He knew what he had to do, knew he had no other choice. He had to stop this, and there was only one way out.

With the gun aimed at the floor of the saloon, Theo fired, startling the

woman. She jumped and turned to him, ready to take aim but clearly confused.

Her own gun fell from her hand in that moment of uncertainty and she quickly scrambled to pick it up again.

Unfortunately, it had already slid across the floor and underneath one of the chairs. She had to bolt to get it.

Theo took his chance. He knocked over another chair behind her, hoping it would slow her down just long enough for him to get Wild Buck out the door and handle him on his own.

But when Theo looked up, he saw the outlaw was already out the door.

With a gasp, Theo was determined he wouldn't let Buck get away. Not this time. He'd come too far and worked too hard to get here. He wasn't going to give up.

Bolting toward the door, Theo knew even a second's delay would be enough to lose his chance.

Just as Theo was about to take off after Wild Buck, something grabbed his ankle, pulling him hard. He fell forward, losing his balance, and crashed to the ground.

For a moment, Theo was confused, unsure of what was going on. But as he gathered himself, sitting up and looking directly across from where he was at, he realized what had happened.

It was her. The woman. She'd pulled on him to stop him from going after Buck.

Her own shoe was still caught in the mass of chairs that had been knocked over in the ruckus, but she clearly had no intention of letting Theo get away with his antics.

For a long moment, he held her gaze, realizing he'd just brought her wrath down on him. Although Wild Buck was getting away, it seemed clear to Theo that they weren't done just yet.

He was about to get an earful.

# 7

"Who do you think you are?" Willa demanded, the blood running hot within her veins. She could hardly believe this fella had gone and ruined everything she'd worked for.

Wild Buck was gone. She wouldn't be able to catch him now. She'd have to start over, asking around once more.

She knew men like this well enough to know his horse wouldn't be at the livery stable. It would be right outside, where he could get to it and ride off in a flash.

"I am Theo Walton, and you just ruined every chance I had of getting the man I'm after," he said, accusing her.

"Me?" She gaped. "You're saying I'm the one who messed this up?"

Willa ignored the saloon patrons who rushed out of the place, clearly worried that the two bounty hunters would turn their attention on the next man they might be able to catch.

She still couldn't believe what had just happened. What sort of a man —and a bounty hunter at that—would shoot to try and distract her?

Did he think it was a clever means of getting her out of the way so he could capture the outlaw instead? Was he so desperate to prove he was stronger than a woman that he thought it was worth the risk of letting a criminal get away?

Willa still couldn't believe it. She couldn't understand why he wouldn't just let her finish the task at hand and get all this over with.

After all, he ought to simply be happy that she was about to put away a man who'd committed dozens of crimes.

Wild Buck had caused the deaths of many. Surely the most important thing was getting him locked up!

A niggling sense of guilt threatened Willa. She, too, had been given the chance of letting someone else take Wild Buck in and ensuring that he paid for his crimes.

Maybe it had been her own pride and selfishness that had gotten in the way. But at least she hadn't been so desperate that she shot off her gun and practically opened the door for Wild Buck to go running!

"If you had just listened—"

"Because of you, he got away. Again. I finally found him and you gave him the perfect opportunity to flee from here, to get somewhere I won't ever be able to find him.

"All of that because you don't know how to let me get on with my work," she shouted.

Willa couldn't contain herself. She thought she might explode after this ridiculous event. How could Theo Walton just let Wild Buck run off?

Why had he tried to distract Willa with the gun? Was he so determined she couldn't catch the villain that he would rather just let Wild Buck go free entirely?

"I couldn't let you shoot him!" Theo yelled. "It wouldn't have been right and you know it. There's a difference between bringing a man in and just taking aim and firing. I simply couldn't let you do it."

“Why not? He’s a criminal. If he was going to fight me, I’d have had no choice. Thanks to you, he can’t even prove that he might not have been violent.

“You’re the reason he didn’t get the chance to come peaceably. I wouldn’t have killed him if he’d simply walked to the sheriff with me,” she said.

“He wasn’t going to do that and you know it. You can pretend nobility all you want, but you knew he would fight you,” Theo said, his amber eyes glinting in the light.

Willa blinked to forget about their brightness. It was easier to be angry when she wasn’t looking directly at him. It was better to ignore his scruffy face and the brown curls under his hat.

“So, you’re trying to make it seem like I’m a violent person who just wanted to get into a fight? All I was trying to do was ensure that an outlaw was off the streets and behind bars where he belongs.

“If you have a problem with me stopping a criminal, then I think you have another problem altogether,” Willa said.

“And I think you ought to have just calmed down from the beginning and listened to reason. There was a better way to do this,” he hissed.

Willa inhaled, trying to calm herself, but she simply couldn’t. Once more, she exploded on him. “This is your fault and don’t think I’m going to forget it.”

“Like you said before, I don’t know a thing about you, other than the fact that you are stubborn to boot. So if you don’t forget about this, what do I care?

“You were being reckless and that’s a disservice to our duty,” Theo shouted.

“No one is talking bad about our profession just because I have what it

takes to stop a criminal," she scoffed, thinking it a ridiculous statement on his part.

What was the matter with this man? Why was he making excuses for letting a fiend escape?

"*Our* profession? Really? I've never heard of a female bounty hunter, which means I've never heard of you. The successful ones? Those are the names I've heard," Theo spat.

"Then hear me now. I am Willa Mavis. I'm the woman who is going to be known for catching Wild Buck, just like I caught Milton Jones, Harvey Ringdel, and Two-Toed Jimmy Poole.

"You can say all you want that I don't know what I'm doing, but those are just three of the sixteen men I've caught in the past three years," she said proudly.

Theo paused, apparently taking in this information. Willa was proud of herself, knowing that Two-Toed Jimmy Poole had been a terrible killer, Harvey Ringdel was responsible for a series of fires that led to the deaths of eight people, and Milton Jones had been a jewel-thief-turned-murderer.

She'd done more than enough to garner attention. She only wished she didn't want attention from this particular man, who was every bit as infuriating as he was intriguing.

She wished she could just get rid of him altogether and push beyond the nonsense that he had drawn her into. After all, he was frustrating her in every way.

And why? Was it because he actually believed what came out of his own mouth, or was she just angry because he was handsome and didn't seem to give her a second glance?

Surely she wasn't that shallow or needy. She'd never needed the acknowledgment of a man before and she certainly didn't need it now.

But it seemed Theo's respect didn't last all that long anyway, much to her chagrin. After a moment, he threw his hands up in flustered rage.

"So what? You need to stop with your melodramatic rants and understand that because of you, neither of us got our man," he pointed out.

Once more, Willa couldn't bear it. How dare he?

Theo had been the one to distract her, leading to Wild Buck's escape. He was the one who hadn't let up even though she had clearly arrived first and was ready to take him in.

"You ruined my bounty! This was mine! How dare you act like I'm the one at fault here," she shouted.

"Enough!" he cried.

But Willa was only getting started. "Don't you understand the damage that Wild Buck has been doing? Do you know nothing about his antics or the lives he has ruined?

"That man deserves to be behind bars, and if he doesn't make it to the sheriff, it ought to be the result of a bullet.

"You let him go free and it's your fault if he harms anyone else," she said, hoping he would finally realize the gravity of the situation.

She tried to gather herself and catch her breath.

"No, this isn't my fault at all," she continued. "Your selfishness is the reason a dangerous criminal just managed to escape.

"He has killed countless people and he is likely to kill even more before I'm able to track him down again. Every last one of those lives is on you. Their blood is on your hands."

"That's a little bit dramatic, don't you think?" he asked, his nostrils

flaring as he glared at her.

“Not at all. I don’t understand why a bounty hunter like yourself would let a wanted outlaw go free. It doesn’t make any sense, and don’t think I didn’t notice it.

“You let this happen. I will hold you responsible for everything that happens now until I’ve stopped his heart or surrendered him to the law,” she said.

Theo inhaled sharply and his expression fell. Something about her words bothered him, although she couldn’t imagine what.

Surely he didn’t care one bit about how she felt. He’d made that clear already.

It didn’t appear that anything mattered to him other than ruining her chance at the bounty, and that was enough to frustrate her, but she still found herself wishing that Theo would think through his actions and make things right. Was he really so blind?

He was a waste of a handsome face if he was going to be such a foolish creature. The last thing she wanted was to focus on his appearance and get caught up in something that didn’t matter when there was something far more important going on.

She needed to catch Wild Buck. That was all that mattered. She had to concentrate on what was most important.

“I really—”

“You have ruined everything I have worked for and I don’t want to see you again,” Willa said. “If we do cross paths in the future, I expect you to stay far away from me. And after this, I have nothing more to say to you.”

Her words were harsh, but it was all she could do to get her point across. Otherwise, she feared, she would be doomed to replay this

entire situation over and over again.

With that, Willa stormed past Theo, charging out the door of the saloon.

There were still a few curious cowards in the corner who had been listening and observing, but Willa refused to acknowledge them. Nor did she glance at the barman, although she felt his eyes upon her.

Holding her head high and trying to maintain her dignity, Willa left that place with her heart shattered.

She needed to figure out what she was going to do next. She wasn't ready to stop searching for Wild Buck, but this was the only information she'd had to go off and it had taken her quite a while to get even this much.

Finding someone else who might share intel with her seemed impossible. If she was going to get back on the trail, it would take a good deal of work just to figure out who to target for information.

Wild Buck was unlikely to return to any of his old haunts. Now that he had not one, but two bounty hunters after him, he would have to get creative.

He would also be desperate, however, and that was the part that encouraged Willa. If he was getting anxious, he might slip up.

Moreover, he would have to turn to his friends, and if she was able to get to them first, she would get her answers.

It wasn't going to be easy, but she could still do this. She could still make up for everything that had just happened. There was no other choice.

And she knew with certainty that Theo Walton was never going to matter. She probably wouldn't ever see him again, so there was no reason at all to be concerned.

She just needed to focus on the more important things and let go of this miserable experience so she could finally accomplish her goal.

Or, she could get her revenge first and then move on after.

Willa wasn't simply angry. She was devastated. But there was still one way she could get back at Theo Walton for what he had done.

She could make him pay for his mistake, for the decision he'd made that had utterly wrecked her chances of getting Wild Buck as planned.

Realizing that she hadn't lost everything after all, Willa smiled to herself. Indeed, she just might be able to ensure that Theo Walton never got in her way again.

# 8

Theo stood motionless, still in shock after the ridiculous display he had just witnessed. Although he knew he had to act quickly, he wasn't sure exactly what to do.

He couldn't believe Willa Mavis was so angry. And yet, he would have been, as well.

Theo had sabotaged her chance to capture Wild Buck, right when she was about to take him in. If he had let her, things would have gotten bloody fast, but was that really an excuse?

Theo chewed his lip, trying to justify the matter to himself. A couple of fellas in the corner who'd been watching the whole ordeal finally sat up properly and got comfortable.

"That woman sure is bullheaded. I never thought I'd see a girl like that trying to stand up against a fella," one said, laughing and shaking his head in disbelief.

"I've met more than a few strong women in my day, but she really is something else," said the other.

"Fella, you were right on, putting a stop to her demands. I can't believe she thought she could talk to you that way!

"It's up to you if you wanted to see that man behind bars and it's a wonder to think of a darlin' like her trying to get in your way!" the first noted.

Theo turned to them with stony eyes.

He had just spent the last few moments telling himself the same thing. He had to justify his actions. He knew more about all this than she did and he couldn't let Buck be shot.

But she didn't know that, and he would have been pretty upset if someone had done to him what he just had to her.

"What you looking at us that way for? She was crazy!" the man said again.

"She was right," he said with a cold timbre. He hated to say it aloud, but he couldn't deny it no matter how much he wanted to.

Willa Mavis was right to be angry. She had been insistent about putting a criminal where he belonged and it was foolish of Theo to stand in her way and to fight her the way he had.

She didn't know why it was so complicated for him, but that was no excuse. It would have been better had he tried to reason with her.

Maybe if he'd spoken to her back in Stonewood and explained why this was so important, she would have been willing to let him take charge.

Then again, it wasn't something he was willing to share, not even with a beautiful woman who had suddenly appeared in his life.

"Wild Buck is dangerous," Theo continued, warning the two men who didn't seem overly intelligent as they sat there, watching him with intrigue.

"He's not a good man and he needs to be taken to the sheriff. He has to be apprehended as soon as possible, and that's what I was trying to do."

"Then why didn't you just send that woman on her way and take care

of it? You sure don't seem to know exactly what you want," the barman said, wiping his hands with a rag.

"You didn't hear what I said? I explained it to her more than enough. I said Wild Buck needs to go to jail. She was ready to kill him in cold blood.

"It was clear from the look in her eye that she wanted one thing only. She wanted to take him out. But he needs a chance with the law first.

"He needs to face the sheriff and do things the right way," Theo said, defending himself against these men.

"I don't understand, are you now defending that woman's actions or are you angry at her? Because you aren't making a whole lotta sense," the barman mocked.

Theo inhaled in frustration. "She was wrong for what she planned to do, but right to be angry with me. I ought to have reasoned with her before we even got here."

The men still seemed confused and Theo sensed they were going to keep pestering him.

"But why did you—?"

"I don't need to justify myself to the likes of any of you!" he shouted.

"Never did see a man so confused by a lady," snickered one of the men under his breath.

Theo chose not to engage. He needed to get going; staying around here wouldn't do him any good.

Although Wild Buck was probably long gone by now, Willa would be chasing after him and there was the slim chance that she might actually manage to catch him.

Theo put a hand to his holster as he always did, out of habit. Most of the time, he did this just to ensure he could have a quick draw. But when he realized it was empty, his stomach churned.

Willa had taken his gun! That woman had stolen it so he wouldn't be able to bring in Wild Buck and she'd be the only one with a chance at taking him down.

Frustrated beyond measure, Theo hurriedly left the saloon and rushed toward the stable. Before he reached it, Willa came bursting out on her horse, racing off in the opposite direction.

She didn't see him, which was certainly to his advantage, but it meant Theo would need to be fast.

He ran to the stables and was relieved to find his horse still saddled as he had requested. He threw a few coins at the groom without a word before mounting and kicking at the animal's flank to get him going.

"Hiya!" he shouted as the horse lunged forward.

Soon enough, they were in a distant pursuit of Willa. He needed to reach her and get his pistol back.

"You're welcome!" the groom shouted in anger as Theo rudely departed.

But he couldn't take time to show gratitude, not now. He had to get his gun before he ended up in a position of actually needing it.

Although she was within his sights, Theo knew from his work as a bounty hunter that it would take only a moment to lose Willa. He couldn't let that happen.

She was up ahead, but hadn't seen him yet, which was the perfect position for him to be in.

How far was she was planning to go? There was a chance she would

be riding for the rest of the day, but Theo had a feeling she was probably just going to whatever spot she intended to stay at for the night.

Maybe she would stay at a boarding house, but those could get pretty rough for a young woman. More than likely, she had her own camp set up.

As they came up out of the valley, Theo saw a forest ahead and Willa heading straight for it. The road went through where trees had been knocked down to clear a path for wagons a few years before, the lumber being used to build up the towns in the area.

But Willa stayed on the road for only a short distance. Soon enough, she slowed and entered the forest to the left.

More than likely, Theo would lose her if he wasn't quick. Once she was in the forest, he would have to be on high alert.

He'd chased enough outlaws to know that the forest was a great place to hide, but first he needed to catch up to the opening where she had entered.

He tried to keep his eyes trained through the trees, but he lost her quickly, just as he'd anticipated.

It took only a few minutes to reach the spot and, once he did, Theo dismounted and led his horse just within the trees so that no one would see him.

He then tied his horse and went on foot to make sure he could get back to his horse with ease, but Willa wouldn't hear him as he tried to sneak up and get his gun back from her.

Theo looked around and saw plenty of signs that she'd come through. There were broken twigs from her horse's hooves, plus a little snag of fabric that was dirty enough that he didn't think it had been from that day.

Had Willa been staying here a few days and just going to every town within a half-day's ride?

At last, he saw movement up ahead.

In a small clearing, Willa had tied her horse and she sat down beside the unlit fire pit. After digging around in her pack, she pulled out an apple and bit into it with a crunch.

She then handed the rest to her steed.

"There you go, boy. Isn't that nice? Maybe tomorrow we can go back to those trees with all the crabapples and get more for the journey," she said.

The horse ate happily and Theo ignored the pang of hunger in his own gut. He was used to going a while without eating.

Any time he was in hot pursuit of a criminal, he would have long stretches where he wouldn't have a moment to sit and eat. Oftentimes, he only ate when he would get back to the boarding house at the end of the day if he'd been busy questioning people or taking outlaws in to the sheriff.

He'd eaten that morning before setting out, but still found himself hoping for a stray apple or two.

Willa sat for a moment. It seemed she was trying to analyze her situation.

Theo silently shuffled behind a tree where he could get a better look at her. He wanted to observe for a little while before going in there and trying to get his gun back.

She had it in the waistband of her skirt. There was also a pocket flipped out where he saw the shape of her own gun.

It seemed as though the pocket was meant to be hidden, but she had it

out where she could easily access it. He'd never seen anything like that on a woman and figured she must have made it for herself.

It was clever. He wanted to rush over and grab both guns, but her ingenuity was distracting and he found he quite admired her skills and ability to adapt her feminine clothing to the rigors of the job.

Theo couldn't deny that she was exceedingly beautiful. Despite himself, he was a bit distracted by that.

And when she took off her hat and let the long, blonde hair cascade down her shoulders, he sucked in a breath of air to steady himself.

She could also hold her own in a fight, and that was something else he found quite attractive.

Not having a lot of chances to meet all that many women, Theo typically didn't give himself even a moment to consider them. He wasn't the sort of fella to go around and flirt with the ladies.

Whenever he was getting information at a saloon, he ignored the painted ladies. He just wasn't comfortable getting close to a woman, knowing he would be taking off again.

So, to realize that he found this particular woman so interesting frustrated him to no end. Nevertheless, Theo made a decision to focus on the important matter at hand.

He didn't need this kind of distraction. He didn't need to watch her or be caught up in anything other than getting his gun back and reaching Wild Buck before she did.

Strategizing how he would get the gun back, Theo watched as she rummaged through the pack again and pulled out a large wrapped package. He figured it was meat of some sort, but what surprised him most was when she held it up in his direction.

At last, with a cocky smile, she looked his way.

“So, are you going to come out of your hiding spot and have a bite to eat?”

# 9

Willa didn't bother to hide the gun on her hip, choosing instead to mock Theo with it, knowing it must be driving him mad to see her like that with his weapon.

Her plan had worked. She'd tasted just enough revenge to feel as though she might actually have gotten some justice.

And yet, she understood just how far away from justice she really was. Theo had taken something very precious from her and she was ready to take it back.

"Give me back my pistol," he said, stepping forward rather boldly. Willa side-eyed him for a moment before focusing on prepping the meat she had in her bag.

"You aren't worthy of the gun of an outlaw," she insulted, turning to face him. "You let Wild Buck get away for no other reason than your own selfishness.

"You couldn't stand the idea that someone else might have a chance to catch him. If it weren't for that, I would have had him."

Theo was quiet, but his lips parted as if to speak and Willa knew it was nothing she was interested in hearing.

"It took me six months to get that lead. The one you just blew," she spat before he could say anything.

At that, his expression shifted. Something in his demeanor changed, and Willa felt certain he was beginning to realize the extent of his error.

This hadn't been some simple catch she'd stumbled upon. This was a fight she had been working toward, a criminal she'd been pursuing for quite some time.

She sighed and shook her head, looking at the meat again and trying to push down the weight of her fury.

"I'm sorry," he said, quietly.

Willa looked up, shocked by the apology. It was the last thing she'd anticipated from him.

Theo wasn't the sort to apologize, that much she had seen already. And yet, here he was, telling her that he was sorry? He'd actually said those words? It took Willa a moment to believe it.

"I haven't gotten any leads in months, either. It wasn't until I ran into you that I knew I'd finally found a chance to get him within my sights again.

"All that work. I understand how frustrated you must be to have seen it go to waste," he said.

"You have no idea," she replied.

Theo took a few steps closer as Willa worked to get a decent fire going. Even now, she winced every time she had to get a small blaze going.

Most nights, she wouldn't be able to sleep until she'd put it out, even if that meant sleeping in the cold.

"Seems to me that it's impossible to hunt Wild Buck down alone," Theo said.

“You think?” she asked with a laugh.

“I got close in Wyoming a few months ago. But I failed there, too,” he replied.

Willa was intrigued. Wild Buck had been in Wyoming? She hadn’t known that. She’d never gotten any leads that would take her there.

What did that mean? This idiot bounty hunter—the one distracting her with his handsome smile and amber eyes—was something of a surprise.

Was it possible that this fool was actually a better bounty hunter than she was? Could it be that he was more successful, that he would be the one to track down Wild Buck?

She wanted to believe it was mere luck that had led him to Wyoming, but the fact of the matter was that she couldn’t pretend she hadn’t made a mistake here.

Somehow, she’d managed to overlook an important detail, a place where her bounty had gone. Indeed, it seemed to Willa that she really had managed to do less than her best.

An uncomfortable, improbable idea began to form in the back of her mind. Before it could surface, Willa pushed it back again. She didn’t want to entertain that nonsense. It made her stomach roil.

But the idea wouldn’t stop fighting to take shape. Even as she warred with it, Willa felt her resolve weakening, unable to stop herself from just considering it.

And once it made its presence known, Willa realized what a good idea it actually was.

What if she and Theo combined their resources? What if they decided to work together instead of fighting like this?

He'd found Wild Buck in Wyoming. She'd found him in Cottonwood. Perhaps if they'd been working together, they might have captured him months ago.

"All right, I know this is going to sound like madness," she began.

"You? Mad?" he asked with sarcasm.

Willa glared at him for a moment and second-guessed her idea, but not long enough to change her mind.

"I'm thinking we ought to work together to find him. We should combine our efforts. We're the closest anyone's ever got to him and that makes us the best chance of taking him in," she said.

Theo was silent for a moment until he finally burst out in laughter. Willa took offense, but knew he had every reason to think she was mocking him.

"You expect me to believe that you want to work with me?"

"I'm serious," she insisted.

"That's even worse! If you actually believe that this is a good idea then I am terribly sorry, but I think you're crazy. The idea of working together is completely foolish," he said.

"You have to admit, we're both taking an awful long time to find him on our own," she said.

"What about the reward?" he asked. "Are you going to get it for coming up with the idea to work together? Am I going to get it because you can't do this without me?

"Or are you silly enough to think we're going to split it? I'll tell you, I have intentions for that money and I don't want to cut my share in half."

“Theo, how much of the reward money do you currently have for Wild Buck?” she asked.

He shrugged and looked at her with confusion. “None, I guess,” he said.

“And how much do I have?”

“None, as far as I know,” he answered.

“Exactly. We can either split it halfway or we can both come up empty-handed,” she said. It was a winning logic and if this man had half a brain at all, he would realize that.

Theo paused for a moment, but Willa sensed he hadn’t come to terms with her idea yet. It was clear he still thought it was nonsense.

His eyes glazed over in near disbelief, but Willa saw his thoughts working behind them. She saw the consideration he was putting into her plan, even if he wasn’t willing to acknowledge it.

“I don’t know what has you thinking this is a good idea, but I just don’t see how we’re supposed to work together,” he said.

“And you’re right. It will be hard. But it’s worth it if it means we actually catch him this time,” she told him, determined to convince Theo to follow through.

Willa hated this. She hated having to beg Theo, to ask him for help, to admit she couldn’t do it on her own.

All she wanted was to stand firm and secure, knowing she had worked hard to catch Wild Buck on her own.

Having to share the bounty with Theo certainly wouldn’t make her happy, but she was also willing to set aside her pride if it meant getting what she wanted more.

If she could catch a villain, Willa would do just about anything.

“What do you say?” she asked, trying to be hopeful even though she didn’t expect him to budge.

“I’m going to have to refuse, darlin’,” he concluded.

“Don’t call me that,” she hissed. Just hearing the endearment from his lips reminded her that he was probably right and they shouldn’t work together after all.

Nevertheless, Willa was determined to try and convince him. She’d been working so hard and getting nowhere.

Although Willa was every bit as tough as the other bounty hunters she’d come across, there was one difference. Willa knew her limits.

She didn’t have the masculine pride that led a man into foolishness.

She was determined and hard-headed and brave, but when she saw a better option, even if it was one that would shake her pride, she could accept it.

Of course, setting aside her pride to ask for help and then being rejected? That was awfully frustrating. She hated this feeling more than any other.

But Willa wanted to do the right thing, even if it was hard.

“Listen,” Theo sighed, “I get that you seem to think this is clever, but I don’t work with a partner. I’ve never teamed up with anyone before and that’s for good reason.

“Truth be told, there’s not a chance in hell I’m going to start now, and certainly not with someone I’ve been fighting with who just stole my gun.

“You may think you were trying to get your justice, but all you’ve

done is make an enemy of me, and that's not the way to get me to go along with your plan."

Willa chewed the inside of her cheek, disappointed by his decision but hopeful she could still get him to change his mind.

As much as she hated the rejection, she knew she could get him to come around eventually. It might take time, but that was something she had plenty of.

Besides, all she had to do was get a small lead. If she got it first, Theo would see that she was someone to contend with.

He'd already leached onto her clues once, and if he realized he would always be one step behind her, there would be very little he could do to try and find Wild Buck without her.

Moreover, she wasn't willing to start from scratch all by herself after he ruined this last chance. She just needed him to think they were going their separate ways if he was going to be this stubborn.

With this in mind, she held her head high and looked down her nose at Theo before giving a shrug.

"Fine, then. If that's what you think is best," she said, letting her tone settle so she didn't sound quite as argumentative as she felt.

"I do. And you ought to realize that I'm right. I don't know what made you think your plan would be the logical one, but it's not, and I'm going to prove that. I'll find Buck on my own," he said.

"It's going to be awfully hard to do that without a gun, but I suppose you can manage," she said, mockingly.

"Without a gun? I think you're going to give that back right now and leave me be," he said, taking another step forward.

"I'm not giving you your gun until you agree to work with me. If you

don't want to do that, it's fine, but you'll have to go on and find Wild Buck without a pistol," she said.

He looked as though he was about to retort in anger, but Willa wasn't finished quite yet. She still had more of his plight to dangle in front of him.

"Unless, of course, you just want to go into town and buy a new gun and ammunition. I'm sure you have plenty of money to do that.

"I mean, since you aren't worried about how long it will take you to get the reward for Wild Buck, you must have plenty of money to get around, right?" she asked, looking him in the eye.

"What?" he snapped.

"Surely if you don't mind taking this long to capture Buck, you have lots of money. So you can just go buy yourself a new weapon," she clarified.

He narrowed his eyes and Willa felt the thrill of victory. There was no chance Theo could afford a new gun. He needed the money from the capture of Wild Buck.

He might even need it badly enough that he was willing to take half of it by working with her to get Buck sooner.

"I want my gun back," he said through gritted teeth.

"As I told you, I will not give this back to you until you agree to work with me," she said.

With a frustrated growl, Theo muttered, "That's fine."

He turned and stomped away, through the trees. It was in that moment Willa realized she wouldn't need to find a new lead to convince him that she was worth partnering with.

And she didn't need to mock him anymore about money. All she had to do was wait.

He would be back.

## 10

"Crazy woman," Theo muttered under his breath as he walked away from her campsite. He figured she couldn't hear him by now anyway.

He'd nearly reached his horse and couldn't believe he'd wasted time by coming out here to try and reason with someone who clearly couldn't be reasoned with.

"Thinking I'd want to work with her? I don't know what's wrong with her, but she's definitely mad if she thinks I'd be that foolish.

"And holding my gun hostage? That's just too much for one man to take," he continued.

Once he reached his horse, he quickly mounted and started to ride away, heading back in the direction of Cottonwood. He doubted Buck would have doubled back toward Stonewood.

Every outlaw knew that the worst thing he could do was to go back in the direction from which he came. By the time he'd make it back, most people in town would have heard about his antics.

They would know about the reward. And then, they'd turn him into the sheriff for a profit.

Buck had been doing this long enough that he wouldn't waste an opportunity to get away again. There was no doubt in Theo's mind that Wild Buck would be on his way to somewhere new and Theo

would have to go after him, this time without a gun.

It was infuriating, realizing that he would have to do this unarmed. But he could never trust someone like Willa. She was a wild woman without reason.

Then again, Theo didn't think there was anyone in the world he could trust. At least, not after—

He sucked in a breath of air. Theo didn't want his mind going back to that. He didn't want to think about what had happened.

Brushing off the memory, Theo was determined not to let it creep back into his mind. That same moment continued to replay again and again—it had been haunting him for years, and it was too much to deal with just now.

But try as he might, Theo couldn't push away the dark cloud. It settled over him like a nasty threat, one that couldn't be eased away.

"Whoa, there," he said, gently pulling back on the reins and bringing his horse to a stop.

With a deep breath, Theo settled for a moment, giving himself a chance to calm down and relax despite the urgency of his circumstance.

Theo pulled out the wanted poster for Wild Buck. He'd been carrying it in his pocket as always, showing it to people around the various towns he visited in his search.

The poster wasn't going to find Buck. Sure, people could match the face and the beard, but what good was it?

Theo needed more than the luck of someone who wasn't afraid to tell him the whereabouts of Wild Buck. He needed more than the chance that someone might know something.

And Buck had to be found.

Theo read the bottom of the poster, the detailing of Wild Buck's crimes. It was painful enough to just look at the photo, but realizing the extent of the man's behavior was altogether something more.

It was further evidence that the world didn't know how to handle men like Wild Buck without the skills of a man like Theo. But there they were, the rebel's rebellions in all their shame.

Murders, thefts, and the destruction of Millsborough Bank, Kline Schoolhouse, and many businesses throughout the towns of Liliport, Gravesdale, and Sockton.

Theo knew it was more than just these towns—the murders and thefts spanned throughout the entire west. There were more, more than what could be listed on this sheet of paper.

Theo was the only one who could stop him now. If Theo failed, this would never end. And it would be all his fault.

A sound behind Theo made him turn in a flash, overcome by the need to defend himself. As his hand instinctively reached to his side for the missing pistol, he exhaled the moment he realized that it wasn't Wild Buck behind him at all.

It was Willa.

Her jaw was set in a way that denoted pride above remorse, but she begrudgingly held out his gun anyway. Quickly, she pasted a forced smile across her face to hide her evident frustration at being weak enough to return the weapon to him.

"To what do I owe this?" he asked with a cocked eyebrow as he reached out to grab it. The weight of it felt good in his hand. Secure.

The gun was a reminder of his own abilities and the fact that he could do this, after all. He was more than capable of tracking down an

outlaw and defeating whatever enemy came his way.

Willa sighed and gave another shrug, something he was getting used to seeing from her.

“I can’t let you head out onto the prairie without it. As much as I wanted to hold all this over your head and try to bribe you, it wouldn’t be right to send you into danger like that.

“I may be a bounty hunter, but I’m not heartless,” she said, barely able to look him in the eye. She was obviously embarrassed that she had caved to this nicety.

“Is that so?” Theo asked, impressed by the humility that lingered under her tough exterior. Then again, there was a lot about her that he had to admit he found impressive.

Not that he would admit it out loud, but deep down, he was certainly astonished by some of the things that she said and did.

“It is so. And as much as I wish I could be fine with sending you out into danger without protection, I just couldn’t forgive myself if something happened to you because of my demands.

“Although I wish it hadn’t come to this, I figure it’s better that you’re safe than me being petty,” she said.

“I’m glad you feel that way. Because you were being awfully petty,” he said, allowing himself just a moment to tease her.

She seemed hesitant, but he saw the faintest smile in the corner of her mouth. Quickly, however, they each transitioned back to the mutual loathing of one another that they’d learned to cultivate in the day they had known one another.

There was no reason to move on from that when it was clearly only natural for them.

“My pettiness aside, I’m choosing not to let you die, and I think that’s generous enough of me,” she said.

“Your idea of generosity is fairly different from mine, but it seems to me you aren’t too concerned about me, anyway. Thank you for not letting me die.

“I suppose, given the fact that you were eager to see me gone, maybe you’re right. Maybe it was generous, after all,” Theo said.

“I’m glad we can come to an agreement,” Willa replied with sarcasm. A lock of blond hair was falling from her hat and down behind her ear. She’d obviously put it up in a hurry to get to him.

Theo knew she was waiting for him to turn away and leave, but something stopped him. He paused there and just watched her for a moment.

Under his gaze, her cheeks turned pink. He sensed she was accustomed to receiving attention from men, but only men who wanted something from her that she didn’t appear eager to offer.

Although Theo wanted to loathe her, he was too distracted by that golden lock of hair and, for a moment, he nearly wanted to reach out and pin it back up for her.

Instead, he gathered himself and looked away before he alerted her to the fact that he had been noticing her more than he wanted to. They both grew stiff and uncomfortable before he lifted the gun in a non-threatening way and gave her a nod.

“Thanks again for giving me back what’s rightfully mine,” Theo said. It wasn’t worth trying to be friendly just because he’d noticed her beauty. She was still in his way and he couldn’t forget that.

“Like I told you, it was the right thing to do,” she replied.

“But you didn’t have to do it,” he acknowledged.

“In a lot of ways, I did. Nevertheless, my threat stands. If you get in my way again, I won’t hesitate to do whatever needs to be done.

“I’m not going to lose Wild Buck just because you don’t want to share the glory with the likes of me. Is that understood?” she asked, looking at him with those intense, richly brown eyes of hers.

“Yes,” he said, swallowing hard. “I understand.”

“I hope so. You already ruined things for me once and I don’t want to have to make a stronger statement than stealing your gun.

“But now that you know I can, just remember that there’s one thing I’m better at than stealing guns,” she said.

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Using them.”

The threat was impossible to miss. She’d made herself clear before this, but now Theo could taste the truth of her words. She wasn’t afraid to kill him if she had to.

And after he’d let Wild Buck get away, why shouldn’t she? After all, he’d aided a criminal. In her eyes, he was as good as a criminal himself.

He could try and explain to her why all this mattered so much to him, but what was the point? She wasn’t going to listen.

She would only fight him until she won, and that wasn’t worth his time or energy. He had to focus on finding Buck on his own.

This passing meeting he’d had that day, it was just a distraction—one he was eager to leave behind and move on from.

Willa’s steed shifted and she looked down and patted his neck. It seemed to Theo that the horse was getting restless and he expected

that was why the two of them made such a great team.

She was every bit as restless. But that was a necessary character flaw for their line of work.

“Looks like someone is ready to get moving and that means we need to clean up our camp,” Willa said.

“Where are you heading next?” Theo asked, before he could stop himself.

She scoffed and tutted at him. “Sorry, but only my partners find out where I’m going next. And since you aren’t my partner, that means you have to get leads through your own skill.”

“I wasn’t asking for a lead. I was just making conversation,” Theo clarified.

“I only make conversation with friends. You have made it perfectly clear that you are not my friend, not my partner, not anyone with whom I would share any more information than I’ve already shared.

“That being said, I think it’s time I head out. And this time, I don’t expect you to have the audacity to follow me,” she said.

“Fair enough. I can do this on my own, anyway. I don’t need your leads or your help,” Theo said, shoving back the voice in his mind that mocked him for his failings ever since he started going after Wild Buck.

“All right, then,” she said, leading her horse to turn away again. It appeared as though she didn’t have a care in the world as she left.

As she started to leave, something surged within Theo. It was something unexpected, something desperate, something he really wasn’t all that proud of.

But she was on her way back to her campsite and he couldn’t let her

go until he'd had his chance to say something.

He glanced at the poster in his hand and sighed. "All right," he said.

Willa pulled back on the reins and slowly turned her head to hear what he had to say. This was humiliating for Theo, but he knew it needed to be done, even if he hated every moment of it.

"All right?" she asked, waiting for him to finish his thought.

"I'll find Buck with you."

## 11

Theo struggled to open his eyes against the blinding light of day. He wished he could sleep just a little bit longer, but he had to get started in a hurry. He needed to find Wild Buck.

He smelled something, though. What was that? Meat? Was something cooking? What was going on? Was someone in his camp?

Theo bolted upright, terrified at the idea of someone having found his camp in the night. They were probably stealing his food!

But when he saw the stunning young woman sitting near the fire, her blond locks cascading down her back and then falling forward as she leaned closer to inspect the meat, Theo remembered everything.

He remembered this infuriating woman. He remembered the day before and how he had ruined her chance to capture Wild Buck, subsequently ruining his own, as well.

Willa looked back at him with confusion, as though something were seriously wrong with him. Suspicion entered her gaze he sensed her wariness.

“Is something wrong with you? Are you all right?” she asked, hesitantly.

Theo exhaled slowly and nodded, letting his heart rate slow down again now that he knew he was safe.

“Here,” Willa said, plopping a chunk of meat onto a plate with apple slices and then shoving the plate toward him.

He was surprised, but took it anyway. Theo hadn’t had a decent meal in years.

He was always having to carry around hardtack that he bought in town or roast some meat he’d hunted with whatever salt he happened to have left.

But this was different. It smelled delicious, made with actual spices.

No one had made him a meal since he was a kid. At least, no one he didn’t have to pay to do it. Now and then, he would eat when he was at a boarding house or some other place.

But those were always meals he’d ended up paying for, even the one he ate at Christmas. And when he was being frugal or just plain out of money?

That was when he would have to accept that there was no point in trying to make his food taste good as long as it gave him the energy to get where he needed to go.

“Sit over here,” Willa said. “The wind’s blowing toward you and you’ll get a lungful of smoke if you don’t move.”

Theo silently did as instructed and sat on a log nearer to Willa. This time when the wind blew, he didn’t get the smell of roasting meat, but the scent of earth and rosewater that wafted from Willa.

It surprised him that she smelled so nice. Their lifestyle wasn’t generally accustomed to hygiene, but he sensed that as a woman, she found it a bit more important than other bounty hunters he knew.

After all, why would she let herself go to waste when she was pretty and still had the capabilities of being a lady if she wanted to?

“How is it?” Willa asked, nodding toward the food.

Theo took his first bit of the meat and it fell apart in his mouth. If he hadn’t already been surprised, he certainly was now.

“How did you get it so even and tender over a fire?” he asked. “The outside is crispy, but not burnt.”

“My little secret.” She grinned with pride.

“Well, it’s a secret you could get paid handsomely to share. Most of the men in our line of work can’t cook all that well,” he said, not making it personal about his own inability.

“All the more reason not to share it. If I do, they’ll never get tired of eating on the road and decide to quit hunting and settle down with a wife to cook for them.

“Maybe this way, I won’t have to compete so much,” she reasoned with a laugh.

“Fair enough,” Theo said.

“Now, I thought we could talk about where we’ve been looking. I’ve been crossing places off my map as I travel—places he’s already been and won’t likely return to, and also places he must have gone through on his travels but he didn’t stay at long enough to make an impression,” Willa said.

“And you want to know where I’ve been and what I’ve found?” Theo asked.

“Exactly,” she replied, spreading out the map so he could see everything. She was openly sharing her information and even had the dates of her stops so Theo could see how recent her leads were.

“All right, well, let me grab mine,” he said, thinking it funny that he had the exact same system.

He set down the food and went to get his map out from his pack. Bringing it over, he unfolded it and saw Willa's eyes light up to see that it really was similar.

"See? We're going to work well together," she said with a laugh.

"I suppose so," he replied. "Let's see where we've crossed over and where one of us has been and the other hasn't."

"You have clearly worked hard on this," she said.

Suddenly, Willa gasped and her eyes grew wide. She looked at Theo and then back at the map in astonishment.

"What? What is it?" he asked.

"Brookhaven? Moran? Whitefalls?"

"Yeah, what about them?"

"I had no idea he'd gone this far west. Wild Buck isn't known to have any ties in that region. I can't believe I overlooked this! Somehow, I just thought that he hadn't gone further than Wilmore.

"How did you track him all this way? And in November? I was looking in Newtown in November," Willa said, incredulous that she had been so far away.

"He was near Newtown in September, so it wasn't a bad lead. Wild Buck is just faster than most people give him credit for.

"So, while you were busy looking for him in Newtown, he'd already made his way west toward where I was looking in Bridgetown. But I got there two days late.

"He'd already moved on, and that's when I found my way to Whitefalls. Unfortunately, I was late there as well.

“He went south to Fareview and then made his way back east just enough to reach Moran when I lost him,” he explained.

“So, how did you end up in Stonewood?” Willa asked.

“Luck, I suppose. I had a feeling he was still trying to throw everyone off his trail and the most logical thing would have been to follow this path here.

“So if that was the logical path, I assumed he’d take the illogical one along this road. Turns out, it was a good call,” he said.

Willa’s excitement was more than evident, but something about it both intrigued and startled Theo.

He wasn’t sure how comfortable he was with the idea that she had a taste for blood. After all, she had made it perfectly clear that she didn’t plan to take Wild Buck in alive…

“I got a tip when I was still in Westbrook. A fella said his cousin from a town near Stonewood had recently come to stay with him because his business had been ransacked by an outlaw who fit Buck’s description.

“When I learned that Wild Buck actually had friends in Stonewood, I knew there was a chance someone there was protecting him, keeping him hidden from the law and anyone who might be eager to turn him in,” she explained, full of passion.

Theo was drawn to that passion. Her bright energy was beautiful and he wondered how he could learn more about her and understand her without getting too close.

It would be a mistake to get close, no matter how tempting it was. After all, he couldn’t fall for someone who had her intentions with Wild Buck. It wouldn’t work.

“I think he may have gone to Coarsegold,” she said, showing him a

town on the map.

Theo's brows met and he looked closely at the spot.

"It's at the edge of the mountains. A day's ride from here. I'm sure it's the best place to go for new leads," she said.

"Coarsegold? Like you said, it's only a day's ride from here," Theo said in confusion.

"I know, but it's a logical place to go. It would be easy to disappear into the trees or even some caves in the area. If there's a place to go and hide, that's the spot," Willa said.

"But why would he stop somewhere so close to here? He just nearly got caught. I expect he's going to want to get further away before he settles in for more than a few hours of sleep.

"It just doesn't make sense," he explained.

"I know the rules. But like you said, he might do the illogical thing just to throw us off. If we think he's going to run, why wouldn't he stay close? And why not stay in a spot where he can disappear at any time?"

Theo sighed, trying to think it through. He understood her logic, but he disagreed with it. It made no sense for Wild Buck to stay nearby when he was at risk for getting caught like this.

He had every reason to run and no reason to stay. If nothing else, this would just be a foolish time to pause.

Nevertheless, it didn't hurt for them to check it out. At the very least, they didn't have any other places to try and they could always continue on from Coarsegold until they hit the next town and keep asking about Buck.

Besides, they would go through three towns on the way to Coarsegold,

and if they managed to get another lead sooner, they would follow that instead.

“All right, I don’t think this is where he’s going to go, but I suppose you’re right. It’s as good a place to check as any. I hope we find him, though I have to admit I’m a bit nervous about wasting time.

“I know you’re a fast rider, but I hope you can keep up with me,” Theo said.

She narrowed her eyes for a flash before taking his empty plate with a sharp jerk of her wrist.

“I’m more than capable of handling a quick ride, and so is my boy here. I don’t need a gelding like you holding me back,” she quipped, insulting Theo quite brashly.

He was still shocked by some of the things that came out of her mouth, but knew it was pointless getting offended. If Willa wanted to insult him, she’d find a way whether he liked it or not.

“One of these days, you’re going to have to learn to act like a lady,” he said, standing from the log.

“If I acted like a lady, you’d only tell me that I’m not able to do things like a man, that I’m not able to do my job as a bounty hunter.

“I get that from enough people as it is and I have no intention of giving them even more reason to say things like that to me,” she said.

“Well, I have to admit that I don’t appreciate being compared to a castrated horse,” he mumbled.

“Then don’t act like one. If you want to put me down by insinuating that I can’t keep up with you, maybe you would do better by actually competing with me and showing me that you have some better ideas than I do or that you’re the better bounty hunter.

“What I don’t need are petty insults,” she said.

Realizing it would do him no good, he didn’t remind Willa that her insult was awfully petty to begin with. It seemed to Theo that she had a response for anything and everything he tried to throw at her and they would only waste time by continuing their argument.

All Theo wanted was to hurry up and find Wild Buck. If that meant putting up with Willa’s nagging or her shocking remarks, he would do it. But he would also bear in mind his own plans and ideas.

He had to, if he was going to survive this little arrangement he’d gotten himself into.

Once they had both loaded up their packs and covered traces of the camp, Theo and Willa mounted their horses and started heading for Coarsegold.

Although he still wasn’t sure if it was the right call, at least Willa had stopped complaining at him about everything, and they would learn soon enough whether or not Wild Buck had made his way to a place where it would be easy to hide.

Of course, once they were to arrive, what then? If no one had seen Buck, would they really have any luck? And what would happen if Buck saw them first?

Theo wasn’t so sure they would make it out alive.

## 12

On the way to Coarsegold, Willa was relieved that Theo had finally allowed her to lead the way. She knew this was the right place to go, this was the path they needed to be on.

She hoped Theo would figure that out, as well, and that he would stop sulking and looking at her with that uncertainty.

She knew what she was doing, and by insisting that they make this stop at Coarsegold, Willa was ensuring that they covered their tracks.

All she needed to do was make him more comfortable around her. Otherwise, the entire journey would be this awkward. That was something she desperately didn't want.

"So, how long have you been chasing after Wild Buck?" she asked as they slowed to a stop for a quick bite of food.

"Oh… a while, I suppose," he said, vaguely.

"A while, as in a year? Two? Six months?"

"I guess it's been about a year," he replied.

"Did you see his face on a poster? That was how I first heard about him. But even then, I still wasn't quite sure I was going to go after him right away.

"It wasn't until I got to town a few days later and heard the people

talking about how he'd killed a man there a week before. His wife saw it happen and thankfully their children were in bed upstairs," she said, fighting back a wave of nausea as images from her own childhood flashed before her eyes.

"That's awful," Theo said.

She nodded, then remembered that she'd asked him a question. "So, was it a poster for you, too?"

"No, it wasn't," he replied.

"You heard something in town? Or was it a sheriff who sent you out after him?" she asked, curious as to what had inspired Theo's determination to find Wild Buck.

Maybe it was just the reward money, like for most bounty hunters, or maybe it was a sense of justice like it was for her. Either way, she was deeply curious.

"I just knew I needed to find him," he replied.

"But how? When did you first hear about him?" she pressed.

Theo flashed her a look that told Willa to stop asking questions. She wondered why he would give her that look, why he would be so annoyed when she was just making conversation.

He was so cold toward her, but she sensed he was probably this way with most people. It seemed to her Theo just didn't know how to act around civilized humans.

She wondered how he had gotten into this business in the first place, but quickly realized it was probably for that very reason. He must not have done well with other people and figured being a bounty hunter would give him the perfect excuse not to deal with others.

"Didn't mean to upset you," she sighed.

“You seem to find it easy to do nevertheless,” he replied.

“There’s nothing wrong with asking when you first learned about a man. I don’t understand why you seem to take offense at everything I say or do, but that’s not my trouble, it’s yours.

“And if you can’t understand the importance of speaking politely with a person, that’s your trouble, as well,” Willa said.

“My trouble is knowing that I need your help just to find one lousy outlaw. I don’t think either of us wants to have this little partnership, but now that I’ve admitted it’s necessary, I think you ought to at least accept that it’s difficult for me.

“I don’t like having to communicate. Now, can we move on, please?”

“You said you wanted hardtack. It’s still soaking. You’re going to have to calm down a bit if you think I’m just going to hand it over while it’s still solid as a rock,” Willa scolded.

“If I want to break my teeth, that’s up to me,” he muttered.

Willa sighed and shook her head, frustrated by his rudeness. She couldn’t understand why someone would choose to be so miserable and alone.

Didn’t he realize there was a chance for them to genuinely get along? That they could be kind to one another?

Willa pushed a nail into the hardtack and saw it was nearly soaked through enough. She hoped Theo would like it.

Willa tended to make her hardtack fairly salty, and if he bought his from shops along his travels, he might not be used to that.

“Here,” she said at last, handing him a couple pieces. He took them and gave her a nod in thanks. It wasn’t much of a reply, but it was something.

“I use a lot of salt when I make it,” she said, the moment he bit down. At once, his eyes went wide in surprise at the taste, but he simply shrugged it off and continued chewing.

“Well, I suppose a bit of extra salt isn’t the worst thing in the world,” he said.

“I know not everyone likes it this way, but I promise you it’s better,” she said.

They were quiet as they ate, but Willa was still very eager to hear more about him and understand why he was this stiff and strange. If they really were going to work together, he needed to at least be a bit friendlier.

“What types of things do you usually make for yourself while traveling? Do you make your own hardtack or purchase it from the towns you pass through?” she asked, still trying to make conversation and figuring it was best to not mention Wild Buck again right away.

“Yes, I typically get it from general stores. And I eat a lot of berries and nuts as I find them along the way, plus hunting, of course,” he said.

“Of course,” she repeated, knowing it was how most of their people ate.

For a moment, she waited for him to carry the conversation by finding something to talk about, but he said nothing. Although she wasn’t offended, she was somewhat bothered by his lack of interest in getting to know her.

If he hadn’t been so handsome, Willa didn’t think she would mind as much. Theo, however, was intriguing to her and because of that, she wanted him to be intrigued by her, as well.

“I like to make my own food, obviously. I can’t very well carry around a sack of flour, but I buy enough to bring to my camp and make the

dough and then I cook it over a small fire," she explained, as if he had asked her for the details.

"That's good for you," he said without enthusiasm.

"Is there anything I can say or do to get you to perk up a little bit? Don't you know that when two people have decided to work together, they're at least supposed to be nice to one another?

"I'm not sure what I can do. How much more of an effort should I make when you don't seem willing to even act like a person in reply?" she challenged him.

"I didn't ask for this conversation and I didn't ask to get to know one another. Moreover, I didn't ask for this partnership. You did.

"If you dislike me so much, maybe you should have found someone else," he said.

Willa fought off the sting of rejection once more and accepted that it was simply going to come with the territory if she was working with Theo. He wouldn't relent no matter how hard she tried and it was foolish to continually put herself in the way of his evident dislike.

Except that she had always been persistent and couldn't take her own advice.

"You know, eventually, you'll have to talk to me," she said, somewhat teasingly despite the fact that she was actually quite aggravated by his demeanor.

"Do I?" he mocked.

"We're going to be stuck together for a while. That means we might as well be friendly, even if we don't care for one another all that much," she said.

"I don't need friends," Theo grumbled.

Willa rolled her eyes. His attitude was terrible, but she wasn't overly surprised by it. Nevertheless, she found herself wishing he would at least make an effort to be polite.

"With that attitude, you probably can't get any friends, anyway," she muttered. His head snapped up and she felt his eyes on her as she put her things away and readied to continue the journey.

~

By the time they set up camp for the night, Willa still knew nothing more about Theo. The only thing she understood about him was that he was every bit as determined to finish this job as she was.

It made her wonder why he'd missed the chance to capture Wild Buck in Cottonwood, but she was already coming to understand that he was a complicated man. Whatever reasons he had for the decisions he made, they probably wouldn't make sense to her.

"So, what's the first stop tomorrow?" Theo asked as they sat near the fire, both their maps out and unfolded.

Willa was surprised he was asking her opinion instead of simply taking charge and telling her how things would be. It made her respect him a little bit more.

"The main part of town is right here, at the base of the mountain. It's a perfect spot for him to pop into the saloon, see if he can get a bit of help or make a friend before finding a place to camp.

"It would be a good spot to hit the bank at night if he's short on money. I'd say we gather information at the saloon and then start searching for him right up here if nobody knows anything," Willa said.

"That sounds like a good idea," Theo said, not meeting her gaze.

Although she'd accepted that he wasn't friendly, she was also beginning to wonder if he was shy. He would look her in the eye

when he was angry or complaining about something, but the moment they were in agreement or calm for any reason, he simply wouldn't make eye contact.

She felt a little bit sorry for him. Did he always feel the need to avert his eyes when speaking with people? Or was it just a problem he had with her?

More than likely, he wasn't comfortable around people at all. This line of work was good for those who didn't have the skill to communicate with others.

He was probably just embarrassed by his own awkwardness.

But by the time he charted a detailed path for them into the town and gave her further insight into where Buck might be hiding, Willa was starting to grow impressed.

"Now, Buck has been getting braver. He used to be afraid of water, but he's been following the occasional river now. He never did that before.

"It means he's getting desperate. He probably doesn't have as many friends in these parts who can supply him with food and water for his travels," Theo said.

Willa was confused. How could Theo possibly know that? What had he been observing that would let him know?

"I thought you haven't been on top of Wild Buck for a while now?" she remarked as a question.

He froze for a moment, but finally glanced at her quickly before giving a hesitant shrug.

"I saw the paths you marked and you can see that some are near rivers," he said. "And as far as your notes go, he stayed close to Lake Rollins for nearly two days."

“But how do you know Wild Buck was afraid of water before that?”

“Oh… it was just something one of the men said when I first started looking for him. I was gathering information in a saloon and one fella said to not bother the usual routes along the water.

“He said Buck nearly drowned as a child and doesn’t like to go there. That’s all.

“Maybe the man was full of it, but I was thinking that if Buck is near water these days, it must be out of desperation,” he said.

Willa was still confused, but she went along with it and figured he was probably right. And if Wild Buck really was getting desperate, that was good news for them.

“Anyway, I think it’s the best shot we have at finally catching him and bringing him in. What do you say?

“We take this path and if anyone tells us he’s gone another way, we pull back and head wherever we ought to?” Theo asked, barely glancing up at her.

“Sure,” she replied. “I suppose that sounds reasonable enough. And if we need any more information, we’re bound to find some reasonable folks.”

With their decision made, Willa decided to let Theo be for the night. She wished he would open up a bit more, but knew it was illogical to expect it.

Maybe, if she was lucky, he would finally be willing to let her in once he got to know her better. But that would take time.

For now, all they needed was Buck.

## 13

Theo opened his eyes slowly and took in the first light that slipped over the land with hues of orange and pink and gold. It was magnificent, just as it always was to see something so striking.

But it wasn't smart to linger and he got up and started the fire, trying to be quiet enough not to bother Willa until he had breakfast ready.

Sure, it wouldn't be half so nice as what she had made for him the previous day, but it was the least he could do to thank her. It was his turn to make a meal.

Theo glanced over at her sleeping frame. Her chest rose and fell in a slow, steady rhythm.

She looked beautiful, so peaceful. Her face was contented and now and then, her lips would part ever so slightly to let out a gentle puff of air.

Moreover, he couldn't ignore the golden hair that spread out from beneath her head like a halo. It gave her such a soft, angelic appearance—angelic in a way that was certainly contrary to her behavior.

Wondering why a woman like her would ever want to be an outlaw, Theo let his eyes take her in for a moment. It didn't make sense.

She was delicate and—aside from her occasional verbiage—rather ladylike. She wasn't forward with him like some of the rougher

women he'd met.

And she had a strange charm about her that he couldn't quite understand.

No, it didn't make sense at all for a woman like Willa to be an outlaw. More than likely, she was trying to escape something.

Maybe an arranged marriage? Or a troubled home life?

It was possible. But Theo still wondered why she wouldn't just go East, where things were safer.

She could be in a place with galas where she could go and dance and enjoy the nightlife. Or cities she could explore without having to worry about criminals and men like Wild Buck.

She could even get married and have a family, something Theo had seen most women desire. Why would she choose this life instead?

Theo wished he could open up to her a bit, that he could share his reasons for being so distant and afraid of the idea of getting close. He knew it was illogical, but it didn't mean he had to push her away to the extent he had been.

Or, maybe it did. He really needed to keep things in perspective and remember what all of this was about. The last thing in the world he needed right now was to be getting soft over a woman with an enthusiastic trigger finger.

"N-n-no," Willa mumbled, stirring from her sleep.

Theo was surprised by the suddenness of it, but he turned and looked at her, watching as her eyes remained closed, after all. Maybe she wasn't waking. It seemed more like a nightmare.

"No, no, please, no," she whimpered in a sad voice. Willa continued to mumble and Theo wasn't quite sure what it was she was saying, but

she began to thrash in the throes of the nightmare, seemingly overcome by the pain of it.

For a moment, Theo froze, not sure what he ought to do. He didn't want to get close and have her think he was trying to harm her. He was also frightened that she might even pull a gun on him.

But could he let her suffer? She was clearly frightened by the dream.

Awkwardly and carefully, Theo made his way to her side. As his hand gently touched her shoulder, Willa bolted upright, her eyes springing open and looking at him with sheer terror before she dry-heaved for just a moment.

"Here, let me get you some water," he said, rushing to grab her canteen.

He brought it to her and she drank in a hurry. Her hands were shaking, but Theo stayed close in the hopes that he might be of some comfort.

"S-sorry," she said with a quivering voice.

"Don't apologize. Are you all right?" Theo asked softly.

He was tempted to place a hand on her back and let her know that he was really there for her, but it wasn't a good idea. She might think he was being too familiar or trying to get close.

"I'm all right," she said.

But Theo didn't believe her. In that moment, when he knew the depths of the risk, he made a choice.

It was a choice he knew would have consequences, a choice that he feared. A choice he trusted to make the moment better for Willa.

Theo placed an arm around her shoulder, a means of comforting her

that he wasn't used to. But as they melded together for a moment, Theo quickly felt a shock of uncertainty.

This felt so much more natural than he had anticipated, as though he was meant to be this close to her, but that was a dangerous way to feel and Theo knew better than to let himself fall into that.

He pulled back quickly and when his eyes met Willa's, he saw her exhale a breath of relief, as though she hadn't known what to do about his comfort any more than he had.

At least now they were in agreement that it wasn't wise for them to get so close. Theo was glad they understood one another without even having to say anything.

But Willa seemed every bit as shy and uncomfortable as he was, and that was a strange sight for Theo. Although he was accustomed to being somewhat awkward and confused about how he should act with others, Willa hadn't been like that.

Now, unexpectedly, she was just as shy and blushing as he usually was. Theo was relieved to know that he wasn't the only one feeling that way.

"I'm sorry, did I sleep too late?" Willa asked, looking around at their camp as though she may have caused a problem.

"No, see? Sun's barely up. I was actually going to make breakfast and figured I'd let you sleep until it was ready. I have some salted pork in my pack and it's best if we eat it up soon," he said.

"Perfect. I didn't know you had that or I might have made it last night. I'm getting a bit low on rations," Willa said, trying to smile.

Theo could see the remains of the dream haunting her behind those eyes.

"I should have mentioned it, but you got straight to cooking and I

knew we'd be traveling together for a few more days, anyway.

"If we don't find Buck today, I can do some hunting when we make camp this evening," Theo said.

"To be honest, I'm a little worried about making camp when we're so close to where Wild Buck might be camping out. If he sees us before we see him…" she trailed off.

Theo nodded, thinking it through for a moment. "If you've got enough to contribute, maybe we can stretch for an inn for a few nights," he suggested.

Willa's lip flinched as though she was trying to hide her smile. He imagined she was every bit as eager to have a comfortable night as he was.

They'd been sleeping at their camps in the forest for the past few nights and he was already missing the boarding house in Stonewood. Theo had no idea how long it had been since Willa had stayed in town.

"I certainly have enough to help," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it. I think we'll do just fine," Theo said.

Willa nodded and moved closer to the fire to cook the salted pork. Theo tried to interject and take over, saying it was his turn to cook for her.

"No, really. I don't mind. I like cooking and you don't need to worry about it when we're out here in the wild.

"No offense, but it sounds like you don't even think very highly of your own cooking, so that's all the more reason for me to take the lead on it," she said.

"I get the idea you like taking the lead on most things," Theo teased.

Willa shrugged, but he saw the grin she was trying to hide. Indeed, she really was the sort of woman who liked to be in charge.

But she was also the sort of woman who clearly knew what she was doing and didn't want anyone else getting in the way and telling her that she couldn't achieve things.

As they ate the pork, Theo noticed how Willa's face continued to fall when they weren't talking or when she thought he wasn't looking. But then, the moment she caught his eye or they started talking about their plans, she would perk right up and look perfectly happy.

He sensed that whatever she had been dreaming about was a very painful memory, indeed.

Theo wondered what her past was like. Something must have brought her here, must have made her so hesitant to talk about her life and her struggles.

Even if it wasn't something she liked to think about, he wished she would at least tell him what her dream was about.

But Theo had no right to wonder these things. Willa wasn't obligated to tell him about her past just as he hadn't told her about his own.

Still, it was difficult to watch her struggle and try to keep a brightness in her eyes when she was clearly still feeling sad.

"Should we get the horses ready?" Willa asked, standing and starting to put away the leftover pieces of meat so they could eat them on the road if needed.

"Yes, that sounds good. And if we just stop for a quick lunch and eat the rest of this and maybe some of the dried berries I have, we should be alright to move on after that and reach the town soon," Theo said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if we get to town before that, but you're right, it's a good call in case. Here, you can put that in your pack," she

said, handing him the wrapped meat.

Theo took it and started to put everything in the packs he had loaded on the back of his horse. They would also need to find water soon, but he didn't want to worry Willa by bringing that up.

If they did, indeed, make it into town soon, there wasn't much to worry about. He just hoped they could get to Wild Buck soon and, more than anything, Theo hoped he could stop Willa from killing the man before things were well and truly taken care of.

At some point, Theo knew he might have to tell her how opposed he was to the idea of her just shooting Buck for no reason.

It was going to be an argument and he hadn't wanted to get into all that just yet, but she was going to be mad if Theo had to stop her from doing something and they wound up losing sight of Buck again.

He figured they could just head into town and he could say something quickly outside of the saloon, just a comment about not shooting or maybe just shooting Buck in the leg if she had no other choice. If it was a last-minute statement, she wouldn't have time to argue with him.

That was certainly the best option.

"You ready?" Willa asked.

Theo nodded and saw that sadness in her eyes once more. Yes, he wanted to know what had brought her to this point.

But he also wanted to know more about the kind of woman she was and why she was so willing to travel with a man she barely knew to capture a man she clearly hated.

"Yes," Theo finally answered, "I'm ready."

## 14

Willa was still shaky as they rode away from the camp. She'd been doing everything she could to try and hide it, but the dream had been so painful.

No, not a dream. A memory. That's what it really was and she still struggled to suppress it.

Her determination to be strong was enough to keep her going, but Willa struggled to accept that she had still not overcome the past.

All she could do now was try to put on a brave face and pretend that nothing had taken place.

Of course, it wasn't only the memory that had happened. There was also the fact that Theo had actually tried to comfort her. Something about that struck her.

It was strange and unexpected, but Willa was grateful for it. She just didn't know how to respond. In the moment, she had been so shocked that it was a relief when he pulled away.

After all, no one had tried to comfort her since she was a little girl and it was a whole new experience to be shown that sort of kindness again.

It really had been nearly too much for her to handle in the moment and all she wanted to do was forget about it so she and Theo could move on and get to the task at hand. After all, none of this meant

anything if they didn't capture Wild Buck.

And if Wild Buck wouldn't be captured? Well, he would just have to be killed.

As she pushed the thoughts away, they rode toward the town and Willa was hopeful they might find a decent inn where they could stay.

As they breached the town's outskirts, it didn't take long to see the large building with the sign that read "Weary Traveler Inn." Willa and Theo looked at one another in relief that they had such luck.

"Looks like we came to the right place," he said.

"My thoughts exactly. Now, we just have to hope that we find our man while we're here," she said.

Willa didn't want to admit it at first, but she was thrilled by the idea of sleeping inside for a change. In an actual bed. Away from bugs and dirt and the risk of being out at night.

All of these things were marvelous.

But as they walked inside, Theo's face began to sag as he stared at the little board near the staircase.

"What is it?" she asked, turning to see.

And there it was. The room rate for a night. There was no chance they could stay here for two nights as they had planned.

Willa nearly gaped at the number and realized that two nights here was almost all the money she had left. What about when they moved on? When they needed food and supplies?

When they needed to bribe people for information?

"Theo, I'm so sorry, but when you asked if I could pay for my room, I

had no idea this town would be so expensive," Willa said.

"Neither did I," he sighed. "And I'm afraid that I don't have a whole lot of money left. To think that we were planning on staying here for two nights?

"I could only afford a week here. And from what you've said, you couldn't even do that long."

"I know. I guess I'll need to make camp," Willa said, her heart starting to pound when she thought about the risk of Wild Buck finding them in the night.

"You can't do that. Wild Buck is a bad man and he might be out there, but the truth is, he might not be the only one.

"Like you said, this town is positioned so strategically that anyone could come in and get what they need and then disappear into hiding whenever they want. It's not safe," Theo said.

"Then what are we going to do?" she asked. "We agreed that we need to check Coarsegold and I stand by that."

"I know," he said. "But I think that if we are going to stay here for a night or two, there's only one way we can afford it.

"I know that's not something either of us wants to talk about, but we have no choice."

It took a moment for Willa to register what he was suggesting and it was a terribly uncomfortable notion. She began to blush and looked at the floor, chewing her lip as she tried to ponder her response.

"We just have to pretend, Willa. I promise I won't… I mean, we just have to pretend we're husband and wife and no one has to be the wiser," Theo said.

"I know you're right. And it's just for the sake of finding Wild Buck,"

she replied, coming around to the idea.

But when Willa looked up, she saw that in her own moment of uncertainty, Theo had grown beet red. Although he'd been the one to mention it, he was clearly uncomfortable and ashamed of having to suggest this idea.

Willa realized that his discomfort was actually pretty striking. It was enough that she might even be able to have some fun with this.

She might have a chance to get closer to him and convince him to open up a little bit, to share more about himself.

She wasn't sure if it was really worth it to her, but she had to look at the positive side. If there was any way that she might be able to interact with Theo, this was it.

They would be thrown together and have to quickly get comfortable or the whole situation would simply blow up in their faces.

They had no other choice.

Theo took a deep breath. "So, are we understood? Do we have an agreement that we will put on this pretense for the sake of catching our bounty and then we can leave all this behind and never speak about it again?"

Willa grinned and nodded. "Certainly, darling. Whatever my husband says," she teased.

Theo blushed and Willa quite enjoyed it. She would use this as an opportunity to be her bold self once more.

Instead of feeling the weight of Theo's many rejections or wondering if she needed to tone down her behavior, she was going to ensure that Theo didn't have a chance to get too comfortable, after all. She would just live the way she wanted.

“Excuse me,” Theo said, managing to catch the attention of a fella walking by.

“Oh! Sorry. Have you been there long? Need a room?” the man asked.

“Indeed, we do,” Theo said.

“All right, then,” the man said, going behind a little counter and pulling out his guestbook and then grabbing a key.

Willa knew this was her first opportunity to embarrass Theo a little bit, all the while spinning their story for the sake of whatever was yet to come. She figured there was no harm in playing a little bit of her game now, even if they were only just beginning.

“Name?” the man asked.

“Theo,” Theo replied.

“Oh, darling, he needs more than that from us,” Willa said in a sweet tone. “You’ll have to forgive him.

“He’s never really had much of a chance to travel and we had to wait for our honeymoon until now, so I’m just trying to teach him how to be more comfortable in places like this.”

Theo stared at her with wide eyes for a moment and the proprietor gave a polite smile. He clearly wasn’t interested in her story, but Willa wasn’t spinning the tale for the sake of the proprietor, only for the sake of teasing Theo.

“Today is the day we celebrate one whole month of wedded bliss,” she continued, noticing how Theo’s amber eyes began to bulge in shock as she went on.

“Ah, congratulations,” the man said.

“Thank you. He’s my charming hero, of course. But you can see that. I

mean, just the look on his face is enough to tell you that he is ever so humble.

“He hates when I go on like this, bragging about him and whatnot,” she said with a girlish laugh.

“Ha! Well, some men don’t know how to appreciate the praise. Anyway, the two of you look absolutely lovely together.

“I do hope you have a nice time here in town and have a chance to rest and enjoy your honeymoon,” he said.

“You’re so kind,” Willa replied.

“Since the two of you are newlyweds, why don’t you enjoy lunch in the dining room free of charge? It’s getting to be about that time and my Edna May makes a lovely meal,” he said.

“Oh, thank you, but we should be quick,” Theo said, nervously.

“Nonsense! You need a proper meal, especially if you’ve been traveling. I’ll take your things up to the room and you just go right on ahead to the dining hall.

“A few of the other guests are already in there,” he said.

“Thank you so much,” Willa replied. “See, darling? He wants us to get a nice meal.” She widened her eyes as if to hint that it was a good idea.

After all, they were low on money and the innkeeper wasn’t likely to make this offer again if they turned him down now. Although they were in a hurry to find Wild Buck, they also needed to eat and get a little bit of rest.

Moreover, Willa knew that her current appearance didn’t match with the story she’d just shared with the innkeeper.

She might be able to say that she looked like this because of the travel, but she would certainly need to clean up a little bit before wandering the town. Otherwise, the man would possibly catch them in their lie and think they were living together outside of marriage.

Will and Theo made their way into the dining hall and there were already a few other people in there, seated and laughing and eating.

The innkeeper came in after a few moments and shared with his wife that Willa and Theo were newlyweds and she would need to get them a decent meal to celebrate.

“Oh! How wonderful! I remember when we first married. Oh, Horace, it seems like such a long time ago! Remember? We were this young once.

“And such a handsome couple you are! Oh, with her golden hair and his amber eyes? The two of you will have just the most beautiful children,” Edna May exclaimed, going on and on.

Willa saw the humiliation in Theo’s face, but he had no choice. He had to go along with the ruse or they would both be in trouble.

It was amusing, but also quite adorable to see him so flustered. He didn’t seem to know what to say or do no matter what was going on around them.

Once Edna May departed to get their food ready, Theo turned to Willa with a fury behind his eyes and she knew he was about to scold her.

Just then, however, another woman sitting near them turned and expressed her congratulations, followed by another. Soon enough, it seemed the whole room was full of excitement for Willa and Theo.

“You two have no idea the joys coming your way. Oh, sure, marriage is difficult at times, but it is certainly worth it. And when he looks at you and blushes like that? Oh, it’s so lovely.

“You can see that he is just overwhelmed by your beauty, that he’s perfectly in love with you,” one woman said to Willa.

Willa laughed and Theo’s gaze turned stony for a moment as he realized this was all at his expense.

“Yes,” he finally said in a stiff tone. “I am obviously, perfectly in love.”

Willa detected the disdain underneath his words, but that didn’t take away how much she was enjoying this. A small part of her felt that Theo deserved this after everything he’d put her through.

If he was going to ruin her bounty, she might as well ruin his comfort, even if it was only for a moment.

It soon became clear that he wouldn’t have the chance to yell at her just yet. Everyone in the dining hall was conversing with everyone else. It didn’t matter who was at which table.

It felt as though they were all friends and, in that moment, all the friends were thrilled for the young couple celebrating their first month of marriage by traveling west and indulging in a bit of sightseeing in a town that happened to be an ideal place to hide.

Wild Buck had to be out there and Willa was desperate to find him. But at the same time, she was equally desperate to find the man hidden away inside the fella she was with.

That was the man she wanted to catch.

## 15

Theo could feel his cheeks cooking. It had been nearly an hour since they first arranged the room and then found themselves stuck in the dining hall, surrounded by romantic women who could only talk about their excitement for him and Willa.

He could hardly believe she'd built that story so quickly and managed to convince all those people that they really were married.

All she had needed to do was tell the proprietor so they could stay in the same room. The rest of it was nonsense and Theo wanted her to pay the consequences of that.

It seemed as though Willa truly enjoyed teasing him. She wasn't just a little bit clever; she was beastly. She knew exactly how to get under his skin and scrape against his nerves.

Theo didn't think he could handle much more of that, even if it did make her so happy to watch him squirm.

"I really wish you hadn't behaved that way," he hissed as soon as they made their way up to the room to gather their things and prepare for their search.

"Oh, just calm down! No one suspects anything and isn't that our goal? We didn't want anybody asking us questions, and now they won't. Instead, you and I will be completely fine," she said.

"Don't pretend that's all this is about. You weren't just working on the

cover. You were trying to make sure that I was uncomfortable. Don't even try to deny it," Theo accused.

"I won't. You're right. I had a great time watching you squirm while they told us how lovely we are as a couple.

"I was just trying to have a little bit of fun, and it seems that's something you need to learn to do as well. Especially if we're going to be convincing people that we're newlyweds. We need to at least pretend that we like one another," she said.

Theo grimaced, knowing she was right but not wanting to cave and relent to her plan. It was frustrating and confusing. Moreover, he didn't know if he could be as convincing as she was.

He'd never had to act as though he was in love before and this was a new and strange experience. He didn't think he could pull it off.

"Think of it this way, Theo. We need to blend in. I'm already dressed like a woman who wants to be a cowboy, and you are always so sullen.

"We have to avoid drawing attention to ourselves and a part of that means making an effort. I need your help with this.

"You and I both have to work together to ensure that no one is the wiser on why we're really here. They might tip off Wild Buck before we're ready," she said.

"Don't you think they're going to figure out we're after him when we go to the saloon and start asking about him?"

"Sure, but that's when we start getting answers. All I'm trying to do is make sure that we have as much of a head start as we need without Wild Buck figuring things out first.

"You and I need to move quickly, and if we're going to do that, it means we also need to move quietly," she clarified.

Theo sighed and shook his head. He was getting irritated already and wishing that he didn't have to deal with all of this.

Willa knew just how to get to him, and he hoped she would know just how to get to Buck, as well. Maybe she was useful, after all.

But maybe he would have to put up with a whole lot of discomfort in order to find out.

"All right, I understand. But don't expect me to be as flirty as you are; I'm just not that kind of fella. I don't know how to do that," he said.

"That's perfectly all right, but I do expect you to try and smile now and then. Just look like you want to be around me, even if that's not quite true," she said, walking past him with an air of excitement.

Theo watched her for a moment, thinking all of this had been a bad idea from the start. Worse yet, he realized he could actually learn to enjoy himself when Willa was around.

Once they were both changed and freshened up a bit, they made their way out from the inn and down the street to the saloon.

Willa paused and gave Theo an imperceptible nod, which he returned. They were both ready, with their pistols in place.

Theo doubted that Buck would be here right now, particularly after nearly getting caught so close by. Nevertheless, they needed to be ready for a surprise.

"If we see him, try not to shoot," Theo said in a hurry, as he'd planned. Before Willa could say anything in reply, Theo was waltzing into the saloon and looking around the room at the patrons.

Willa came in right behind him and he sensed the question in her mind without having to hear it on her lips. Instead of asking, she followed him as they found a poker game to sit and watch.

“What’s the plan now?” Willa asked him in a whisper.

“We watch the game and start asking a few of the other patrons about our man. It’s best we just blend in, right? That means we need to start off in the background,” Theo said.

Willa seemed to agree so she sat back and Theo watched the game, cheering with the others when one fella got the winning hand and ended the game.

“Well, that’s a nice combination of skill and luck,” Willa exclaimed to the man, who simply looked her up and down with a gleam in his eye before he tipped his hat to her and then walked away.

A few more rounds took place before Theo looked up toward the bar.

“Want to join me?” he asked Willa.

“Don’t mind if I do,” she replied, getting up and following him.

The barkeep came over and Theo ordered two whiskeys.

“You sure about that?” the man asked, looking warily at Willa.

“Oh, don’t you worry,” she said. “I can handle my liquor.”

“If you say so, miss,” he replied. From there, he got their whiskeys and Theo ushered him close.

“Now, I do have a few questions for you about your patrons,” he said.

The barkeep looked back at Willa and then at Theo before understanding registered in his eyes.

“I get what you must be here for, but I still don’t understand the woman,” he said.

“She’s no different from me,” Theo replied, hinting that she, too, was

a bounty hunter.

But the barkeep looked at her again and started to grin. “Trust me, friend. She’s quite a bit different from you,” he said.

“Enough of that,” Theo hissed. “I’m here to ask about a man who might have come through here yesterday or today.

“Scar on the cheek. He would have wanted to blend in, what with the multitude of saloons he has left destroyed in his wake.”

The barkeep sighed and looked at Theo resignedly. “I think I know the fella you mean. He didn’t come to the saloon. He wouldn’t do that,” he said.

“Oh? Why not? You know him? You know he wouldn’t make that mistake?” Theo asked. Willa leaned in close, waiting for the answer.

“The man you’re looking for? I saw him on the road. I know of a few people who are… acquaintances of his,” he said.

“And do those acquaintances live nearby?” Theo asked.

“One does. And if there’s anyone he was going to, it’s her,” he said.

“Her?” Willa asked, looking excited.

“Yes. The man you’re looking for, Wild Buck? Right?” the barkeep asked.

Theo and Willa looked at one another, knowing that this could blow their cover, just admitting the man they were after.

“Indeed,” Theo finally said. “That’s who we’re after. And if he really is the one you have information on then I want to know what else you can tell us.”

“That’s what I’m saying, you see? He’s rather fond of a woman in

town. Well, outside of town, actually.

“And when I saw him riding through, I was a bit anxious because I know he’s wanted, but he just gave me a nod and took the left where the road forks.

“He didn’t come on the right, into town. He took the left,” he said.

“And where does that lead?” Theo asked.

“Aren’t you listening? That leads to her home. I’m saying he went to find her. More than likely, they’re doing just fine, enjoying one another’s company,” the man said.

Theo paused and took in the information. He didn’t see much of a point in it. A woman? Buck had never cared about a woman for more than a night or two.

There was no chance he would risk staying somewhere so close to Cottonwood just for a woman he’d met once upon a time.

And if he was there? He’d be long gone by now. That had been the day before. Buck wouldn’t stay with a woman longer than he had to.

“This is wonderful,” Willa said as the barkeep made a run for other customers.

“What do you mean?” Theo asked.

“We have a lead again! We need to find out who this woman is. She lives back down from the fork and that’s helpful, at least. We just need to head back there and take the left,” Willa said.

“What do you mean? It’s useless, Willa. It’s out of Buck’s character to stop and take time for a woman like that. I don’t think that’s where he was really heading,” Theo said.

“But the barkeep saw him going that way and that's all the

information we have. Remember our original plan? Searching the base of the mountains if we have to?

“This is a far more solid lead than that. I think we need to try and find the woman and see if she can tell us anything. Or, if we’re lucky, Wild Buck is still going to be there,” Willa said.

Theo still didn’t like it. He hated wasting time and this seemed like just the thing to waste time on.

Why couldn’t Willa see it? Why didn’t she understand that they needed to move on and leave Coarsegold? Buck had to be gone by now.

“By the way,” Willa said, continuing the conversation, “I wanted to say that I’m impressed.”

“Impressed by what?” he asked.

“Your ability to question people and get information. You knew exactly what to say. You dropped the reminder of Buck’s exploits so the barkeep didn’t keep any loyalty to him.

“That was clever. You’re really good at this,” she said.

Theo had always had a skill for interrogating people and knowing when to pretend he wasn’t interrogating at all. Even if the information he’d received was utterly useless, Theo was still grateful that he’d managed to get something.

He needed the boost to his confidence and Willa was giving him that. It was something he hadn’t expected.

“I’m glad you feel that way, thank you. But it doesn’t change the fact that this information is useless and I don’t want to waste time on it,” he said.

Willa leaned in and kept her voice down, but she couldn’t hide her

smile.

“Don’t be a fool,” she said under her breath. “We don’t know the barkeep’s true loyalties.

“He gave you information and it seems like he’s on our side, like he wouldn’t want Wild Buck coming in here and ruining things, but we don’t know that for certain.”

“And?”

“And because of that, I’m letting you argue with me and I’m pretending to reason with you. But as it happens, I know exactly where we’re going and who we’re going to find there,” Willa said.

Theo’s skin prickled as he realized what she was saying. Something about her words left him overwhelmed to think that they could possibly be this close.

“You mean…”

“Yes, Theo. I know exactly the woman he’s talking about. And I think it’s time we get over there before anyone alerts her—or possibly Wild Buck—to the fact that we are on our way,” Willa said.

Theo tried not to show his shock. He wanted to keep up the ruse as well as Willa had.

But when she grabbed his arm and smiled, leading him away from the bar and toward the doors of the saloon, he was taken aback all over again.

Who was this woman fraternizing with Wild Buck? And more than that, who was this woman holding Theo’s arm and making him feel as though he needed to put on a show and pretend better that he knew what he was doing?

Who was this woman who knew more about Buck than he did, this

woman who was incredibly clever and managed to get herself into just enough trouble that she could work her way out of it?

When Willa had first suggested they work together, Theo hadn't thought it was such a good idea.

But now? He was beginning to realize she was the only chance he had to find the man he was looking for.

And beyond that, Willa seemed to be his only chance at really living in the world rather than sulking in the shadows.

## 16

Willa and Theo began the walk back to their room. She sighed, thinking through their next steps and what would be required of them moving forward.

It was obvious Wild Buck had gone back to that woman, but she needed to help Theo understand what this meant.

“He must have gone to Mystic Springs,” she said.

“Mystic Springs? That’s on the other side of the mountains. Has he gone there before?” Theo asked in surprise.

“Indeed, he has. In fact, Wild Buck has a… well, I suppose you could call it a relationship. There’s a saloon there and one of the girls who works out of it knows Buck pretty well,” she explained as vaguely as she was able.

Theo shifted a bit as he walked, clearly uncomfortable with this piece of information. Willa couldn’t understand why. More than likely, he was just upset that he hadn’t been the one to figure it out.

It would seem Willa had wounded his pride by being the better investigator.

“I don’t know if that’s true,” he said. “Sounds like nonsense to me.”

“Oh, hush. Don’t go getting offended just because you weren’t the one who learned about it first.

“The fact of the matter is that this woman, Dove is her name, she’s supposed to be quite a beauty and excellent at getting what she wants.

“She probably fooled Wild Buck into thinking she would actually want to be with him,” Willa said with a laugh.

“Still sounds fishy to me—”

“That’s just because you want to be the one who has all the leads,” she said, interrupting him. “But sometimes, you need to accept that you aren’t the only one who has a clue as to how all this works.

“And it certainly is possible that Dove and Wild Buck are actually working together. Although I’d rather she be disloyal to him—I’m doubtful that we could convince her to turn on him.”

“Listen, Willa, you seem all excited about this and everything, but isn’t this just based on the rumors of a whole lot of painted ladies?

“Aren’t they inclined to make up stories like these so they can get away with whatever they’re inclined to get away with? Honestly, I don’t think you’ve really considered how these types of rumors get started,” he argued.

“What do you mean by that?” she challenged.

“I mean that it’s silly to think you know what a woman like that is willing to say or do for attention. She probably wants everyone to think she has a relationship with Buck because then the men will treat her right.

“If they don’t, they’ll be afraid that she’s going to send Buck after them,” he said.

“Wouldn’t she lose business?” Willa asked, scoffing. “Think about it, what man is going to… hire her? What man would be willing to approach a woman cared for by Wild Buck?

“It’s a foolish rumor to start. I think it would take a daring man to hire her, not just a daring man to mistreat her.”

“That’s a very womanly way of thinking about it,” Theo said, dryly.

“And is there something wrong with that?”

“Nothing wrong with it, but I think you should bear in mind that Buck isn’t going around trying to find a decent woman to spend his life with.

“He’s looking for someone who’s going to hide him, someone who will be loyal. That’s not going to be some lady of the night he met in a saloon,” he replied.

Willa sighed, knowing that her lead was true. She couldn’t understand why Theo would give her this attitude when it was obvious that Buck had gone to Dove’s place.

Everyone knew it. They had already been told by the barman. Why couldn’t Theo see it?

“I just think it’s all based on a whole lot of rumors started by women,” he continued.

“What of it?” Willa snapped, turning on him. “Would it somehow be more valid to you if we heard it directly from a fella? Was it not enough that we were just told he went after a woman?

“I don’t have any idea what’s wrong with you that you would have a problem with women being the ones to tell you. A man just confirmed it, so why can’t you accept that someone else might actually know better than you?”

Theo looked as if he might try to retort, but Willa wasn’t going to give him the chance. She was frustrated by his inability to accept what she knew.

Moreover, he couldn't seem to accept that she was every bit as good of a tracker as he was.

"You need to trust my judgment now and then. I'm the one who led us to Buck a few days ago and it's unbelievable that you still can't accept that.

"You ought to be ashamed, honestly. It shouldn't take this much effort on my part just to make you see that I know what I'm doing," she hissed.

Theo shook his head as they arrived at the boarding house. It was clear to Willa that he didn't care to continue the conversation until they were alone again.

But it took only a few moments until they were up the stairs with the key the innkeeper had given them. Theo opened the door and Willa's skin immediately prickled.

"Good heavens," she said.

"And there we go…" Theo muttered.

"What are we meant to do about this?"

"I don't think there's a whole lot we can do. Looks like we have one bed that we have no choice but to share," Theo said.

"And you expect me to be all right with that?" she asked.

"Does it matter whether or not you're all right? I'm not, either. But what can we do about it? What do you want from me?" Theo asked in frustration.

Willa understood his irritation. There really was nothing more they could do, and she was every bit as annoyed by it as Theo was.

Nevertheless, they had to accept this arrangement and the fact that

they'd wound up in this situation. If they had admitted to not being married, they would have appeared perfectly immoral for sharing a room.

And it was clear they weren't siblings, but even if they'd pretended to be, they still would have ended up with a single bed to share, more than likely.

"So, we're supposed to share like this? Not only is that improper, but I find that I also can't bear the idea of sharing a bed with you and being so… close to you," Willa grumbled.

"Believe me, I'm not looking forward to this, either. If there's one thing you can trust, however, it's that I won't touch you.

"There's nothing in the world that would make me that desperate," he added.

Willa's jaw dropped in fury, but Theo simply walked past her and dropped his pack on the side of the bed by the window. She couldn't believe he would so simply state such a rude comment, especially when they were going to have to be this close.

While she had no worries that Theo might try to get fresh with her, Willa knew she might have an ideal chance to kick him in the night and make it seem like an accident.

And that was precisely what she intended to do.

"Fine, we can't do anything about this bed situation, but what about tomorrow? Are you going to follow me?

"Can we go and check with Dove to see if Wild Buck went to her place?" Willa asked, bringing the conversation back around to the most important point.

"I still think it's a waste, but we don't have much else to go on. If you really believe it's the best choice, we might as well.

“You’re right that you were the last one of us to get any real leads and I guess I just have to indulge you a bit until we know anything for certain,” Theo said.

Willa placed a hand on her hip as Theo took off his leather vest and hat. He didn’t seem interested in changing out of those dirty clothes before bed.

“It’s not an indulgence if it’s our best chance. You and I both know there isn’t much of a shot of answers any other way.

“Can you just have a little bit of faith that I might know what I’m talking about? Can’t you see that I do have some idea of what I’m doing?” she asked.

“Isn’t that what I just said?” Theo retorted.

“No, actually, all you did was relent that I had a good lead. That’s different from admitting that I’m a good tracker, that I know what I’m doing as a bounty hunter,” Willa said.

“Well, I’m not as good with words as you are, so maybe you oughta just let me have a break here,” Theo said.

Willa couldn’t believe his audacity. Why was Theo so rude all the time? And why wasn’t he softening up? She’d thought that, eventually, he would come around and be gentler with her.

Instead, he only seemed more annoyed with her as the hours passed. He was infuriating, and Willa wished she could undo this whole arrangement and go back to searching for Wild Buck herself.

After all, she was the one bringing more opportunity to the table. She was the one who knew where Wild Buck had been and where he was going. She knew about Dove.

And she’d known to come to Coarsegold. Theo didn’t have any of that. He needed to accept that Willa was the one he should be following

rather than arguing with her this way.

As if he could read her thoughts, Theo sighed.

“Listen, I know you’ve done well to come up with some leads, and I don’t mean to insult you. I just don’t understand you or how you think, and sometimes you drive me crazy,” he told her.

“That’s really not helping,” she said, tersely.

“Well, I’m afraid it’s the best I can do for you. It’s not easy, trying to understand how to work with someone.

“I told you from the beginning that I’m not used to having a partner. Maybe if you had listened to me, you would understand,” Theo said.

“So now it’s my fault for not listening? Did you not gather that this is a new experience for the both of us?

“I just thought you would be happy for the chance to work with someone so you weren’t stuck trying to do all of this alone. I know I was relieved.

“Now I’m thinking I made a mistake in trusting you at all,” she said.

“Trusting me?” he scoffed.

“Yes! Trusting you after you ruined my chances at capturing Wild Buck back in Stonewood. If you hadn’t done that—”

“I’ve had enough of this,” he griped, turning toward the bed.

Fuming, Willa watched as Theo crawled under the blankets and rolled onto his side, facing away from her.

She narrowed her eyes at him and then took her things to the other side of the dressing screen to change out of her dress and into her sleeping garments, knowing that it was shocking to lie next to a man

who wasn't her husband and wearing nothing but this.

Nevertheless, she wasn't worried that he would be offended and there was no chance she would sleep in her dress or other bulky clothing.

And since Theo wasn't looking at her anyway, there was nothing to worry about, was there?

Still angry from his insults, Willa climbed into the bed next to him and got under the blanket. She turned her back to him, hoping she didn't accidentally flip over in her sleep to face him.

His mug was the last thing she wanted to see when she opened her eyes in the morning.

Willa heard the steady rhythm of his breathing as he fell into a deep sleep and she was relieved he had managed to do so right away. It meant she wouldn't have to lie there in the awkward silence with him also trying to get some rest.

But much to Willa's dismay, the bed was small enough that their backs touched ever so slightly and she couldn't ignore the comforting warmth of Theo's body. It was irritating to find him so soothing.

And as she lay there, trying to ignore him, there was only one way to bring herself any relief.

With a sharp jerk of her leg, Willa kicked Theo's calf. He stirred and grumbled for a moment before falling back to sleep.

She smiled to herself, glad to have even the smallest hint of revenge.

Before long, Willa found herself succumbing to the lure of sleep, and with her eyes closed and the hope of the next day's journey, she gave into the fitful, restless night.

And as she dreamed, she saw visions of herself aiming her pistol at Wild Buck, ready to shoot—just as Theo jumped in the way and

pushed Buck aside.

## 17

Theo woke to a blend of frustration and remorse in his chest. He didn't want to be Willa's partner, but that didn't mean he wanted to get rid of her.

There was something about her, something that made him uncomfortably vulnerable. That bothered him more than anything else and he didn't know how to express it to her.

He tried not to wake her when he slid out of the bed, but Willa stirred immediately and Theo wished he'd been gentler. Although they were in a hurry, he wanted to make sure she got enough rest.

When she opened her eyes and looked directly at him, her mouth turned down in a grimace and she groaned and looked away.

"Am I that repulsive?" he asked, hiding his insecurity behind sarcasm.

"One of my last thoughts before falling asleep was how much I didn't want your face to be the first thing I saw in the morning," she replied.

"Glad to know I'm not the only one who can hand out insults," Theo said.

"Don't you worry, I'm more than happy to share with you my displeasure. Anyway, how late did I sleep? We need to get moving soon, don't we?" she asked.

"The sun is just coming up. We can head out right away. If you want

some food first, that's all right, but we'll need to get out of here quickly," Theo said.

"Before we do anything, I need you to turn around," she said in a cold tone.

"Huh? Why's that?"

"Because I'm in my night clothes and I need you to turn around so I can get behind the dressing curtain," Willa replied.

Theo's mouth twitched to hide his smile and he gave her a simple nod before turning around. A small part of him was tempted to sneak a peek at her, but he refrained.

He knew, without a doubt, that she would kill him if he was caught.

The two finished getting ready and then Theo led Willa down the stairs. The innkeeper was already milling about, trying to get things ready. He came out to them with a tired smile on his face.

"Ah, good morning," he said.

"Morning," Theo replied. "Had a nice night?"

"I suppose. Do the two of you need anything to eat?" the innkeeper asked.

Theo looked at Willa to wait for her response but she merely shrugged and looked away. It was an impolite gesture, but he was somewhat amused by her newfound attitude.

She was visibly upset and Theo gathered the innkeeper wasn't sure how to respond. Figuring he might as well play into their little charade, Theo smiled at the innkeeper and leaned forward.

"Sorry about her," he said. "Any man knows how it is to have his wife angry with him, right?"

Theo glanced back at Willa and saw the slightest hint of a smile on her lips, clearly amused by his efforts. The innkeeper, likewise, smiled and began to laugh.

“Oh, I can hardly tell you how well I understand that. Come, let me get you both some eggs at least before you set out,” he said.

Within twenty minutes, Theo and Willa had finished the food. With that, they were ready to set out and find Buck.

They started riding toward the next town, making their way in hopes that they would find Buck soon after arriving.

Theo noticed Willa remained fairly quiet and unwilling to share what was on her mind. It was a stark contrast from the previous days when she had been talking nonstop and rather unpleasantly.

He wondered what was going on with her and why she was acting like this. Did she suddenly decide that he wasn’t worth her time and attention, after all? He didn’t mind that too much.

In fact, it was better this way, he wanted to convince himself. He didn’t need to think about her sensitivities just because she was offended by him.

Theo kept telling himself that he really felt this way, that he was happy with her silence. However, there was a part of him, a big part, that was uncomfortable with her quiet demeanor that had come on so suddenly.

She was darkening in the same way the clouds up ahead threatened a downpour.

“So, this could be it,” he said, trying to make conversation as they rode along.

“Hmm?”

“I mean, this could be the end of our search. We might actually find Buck here pretty soon. I’m sure you’ll be happy about that since it means you don’t have to deal with me anymore,” he said.

“I’m quite sure you’re the one relieved by that. Besides, I thought you were skeptical about this? You said we were wasting our time and all that,” she pointed out.

Theo looked away from her and stared ahead along the road. She was right.

He’d said those things and had treated her like a fool for hoping they were going to find this woman Buck supposedly had a relationship with.

And if they were going after him as planned, Theo had to decide how he really felt about it. Did he think she was a fool for believing it? Or was it possible they were just about to find Buck?

If they did spot Wild Buck, Theo needed a plan. He had to figure out a way of stopping Willa from hurting him and causing further problems.

If she shot Buck, Theo was in trouble. He had to prevent that from happening.

“Well, I may have said we were wasting our time looking for Buck with that woman, but I’d rather waste my time following leads than wandering around unable to find any less to begin with,” Theo said, answering her question.

“I suppose that’s true. You would have been pretty humiliated if you’d been forced to keep looking while I came in and stole the victory,” Willa said in a mocking tone.

“And yet, here we are, with your victory coming in the form of a soiled dove and a barkeep who doesn’t know how to keep his mouth shut,” Theo said with a laugh.

“And is there a problem with getting information that way? Are you trying to say it’s not enough to learn the truth through people like that?” she asked, defensively.

“Willa, that’s how I usually get my information, as well. I’m pointing out the fact that we depend on the links of fellow criminals, thieves, and immoral people just to stay afloat.

“I think it’s pretty ironic that we outcasts always have to rely on outlaws,” Theo pointed out.

“Well, perhaps you could try holding yourself to a higher standard so people could see the difference between the two,” Willa said, somewhat accusingly.

“Ha! You think? I suppose you’re right. But I’m not the one who has gone against every expectation of what I ought to be,” Theo said.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, clearly offended.

Theo hesitated. He’d been trying to tease her, to make light of things.

Somewhere, deep down, he was feeling a little bit guilty about how he’d behaved. Now it seemed he wasn’t doing anything to help matters.

“I was just saying that as a female, you’re expected to be one thing and you defy that. I’m certainly not criticizing you for it. I actually find it quite refreshing,” Theo said.

Willa didn’t respond right away and he could see that she was considering his words.

“Did I offend you?”

“No,” she replied. “But that’s because I’m not easily offended. Besides, I’m happy with the choices I’ve made. This is what I was made to do and nobody can tell me I’m wrong for doing it.”

Theo saw a hint of a smile on her face and he was relieved that she felt the way she did. At least she was understanding that his intentions were pure and he was simply making an observation.

Still, he was curious as to what had led her to be the woman she was. It was strange to know someone who lived a life so antithetical to everything society would have accepted.

Nevertheless, he was happy to get to know this woman who was so unique.

“What is it?” she asked, seemingly uncomfortable with his searching gaze.

Theo took a deep breath and looked away from her. “Nothing. I was just noticing that the clouds are getting darker. I think a storm is coming.”

“Certainly looks like it—oh. There it is,” Willa said, lifting a hand to the air as if she had just felt the first drops.

“I have a feeling we’re about to get soaked,” Theo said, looking around.

“We’ll be fine. I’m sure it’s not going to be so bad,” Willa said.

But just as she finished her statement, the storm hit, drenching them in an instant. Willa let out a yelp of surprise over the noise and Theo urged her toward the lone tree that stood near the road.

“Get down,” he said, dismounting.

Willa did the same and they crouched under the branches, letting their horses bear the brunt of the downpour.

“Good heavens, I didn’t anticipate it to be this bad,” she grumbled.

“It’s all right,” Theo replied, loudly to be heard over the rush of rain.

“We’re going to be fine.”

“Well, I know that,” she snapped, defensively. “I was just saying that I’m surprised.

“We wouldn’t be able to see very far, riding in this. Normally I can ride through a rainstorm just fine, but this is so heavy.”

“It sure is. And something tells me that this storm is just the beginning of everything ahead of us,” Theo said, grimly.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, looking uncomfortable.

They were sitting awfully close, given the limited amount of cover from the tree. It was clear to Theo that Willa didn’t want to sit this close to him, but she had no other choice.

He was starting to feel a pull toward her that he didn’t quite understand, but it made him glad to be near her. Wondering if he could ever make up for the discomfort between them, he eyed her closely for a moment before answering.

“It’s going to be pretty intense, catching Buck. I’m curious what your plans are after we catch him.

“Are you going to use the money to find yourself a nice place to live and settle down somewhere?” he asked.

Willa scoffed and shook her head as if that was nonsense. Theo waited while she seemed to be forming an answer in her mind, something she wasn’t quite sure how to say.

“I guess I’ll just move on to the next guy,” she said. “There are more than enough criminals still to be caught.”

It wasn’t the answer Theo anticipated, nor was it the answer he had been hoping for. Although he couldn’t begin to explain why, he wanted to hear that Willa would take time to rest, that she would

settle down and be comfortable for a while.

Learning that she was just going to keep going, keep moving, it made him uneasy. It didn't seem right that she should be forced to continue this way.

He felt an urge to see her living in a comfortable home with all the amenities most women craved. He just didn't understand her.

"Why did you choose this line of work?" he asked.

Willa shrugged. "Woke up one morning and realized I had nothing better to do," she replied with sarcasm.

Theo knew in the moment that his curiosity ran deeper. He wasn't just trying to make conversation, he truly wanted to know what was in her heart and what she had experienced that led to all of this.

There had to be a reason behind it, and he sensed that the reason was something deeper, something she had no desire to share. Whatever it was, she was clearly wounded by it.

A hard expression formed on Willa's face, something that warned him to let it be and not push any further for information from her. Clearly she was upset about something, perhaps a memory or whatever had led her down this path.

He imagined it was very different from his own journey, but everyone had secrets and sometimes it was best to let those secrets be honored in the silence in which they were buried.

But Willa's expression began to thaw and he saw the exhaustion in her eyes as they sat there, shoulder to shoulder, underneath the tree.

The storm didn't appear to be letting up any time soon and Theo turned his gaze to look out over the prairie.

He sighed, waiting in the blur of the day, fat drops of rain dripping

through the branches of the trees. It seemed like an eternity passed before he felt the weight of Willa's head on his shoulder.

Theo looked down and smiled. She was asleep, having drifted from consciousness in a peaceful bliss.

His heart skipped a beat at the sight of her and Theo immediately began to wonder if he would ever know her better.

It was only about ten minutes before Willa jolted upright and looked at Theo with startled eyes.

A blush crept into her cheeks when she looked at his shoulder in the realization that she'd fallen asleep on him. That she had been cuddled up close to him.

It was the most beautiful blush Theo had ever seen.

## 18

They were only a couple hours away from town and Willa was still recovering from her embarrassment after waking on Theo's shoulder earlier in the day.

As soon as the rain started to lighten up, they moved out, heading straight for their destination.

They didn't talk much at first and for that, Willa was grateful. She hadn't known exactly what to say after their conversation earlier and how curious Theo had seemed about her decisions in life.

Why did he care? Why was he asking her to begin with?

Riding along the road, Willa and Theo passed by an old, abandoned campsite. Tin cans sat on a fence. Someone had either left them there or had attempted target practice and failed miserably.

But Willa smiled and pulled the pistol from her hidden holster and took aim, firing one shot after another in quick succession and knocking down all six cans with perfect accuracy.

She grinned, blew the smoke from her barrel, and put the gun back in her holster.

"My goodness, I didn't expect that," Theo said with a laugh. It was clear that he was impressed. Willa hated that his praise made her feel so good, so confident.

“It’s nothing,” she replied.

“No, that was definitely something. You didn’t miss a single shot. Look, there are more cans up ahead,” he said as they continued riding.

“Well, I’ll just let you get those,” Willa replied, not wanting to bask in his attention any longer.

She had never needed anyone’s praise before and this sudden urge to feel good about herself under his gaze was absolutely frustrating.

“I don’t know, I might humiliate myself after the little show you just put on,” he said, although she heard in his voice that he was baiting her.

He saw her as enough competition that he was clearly eager to try besting her.

“Just do some trick shots with me,” she said with a shrug.

“You sure about that? I don’t want to steal your thunder,” he teased.

“Don’t worry. I’m not afraid of thunder. It’s just noise.

“It’s the lightning that strikes, and I’m fairly certain you can’t steal that from me no matter how hard you try,” Willa responded with a bashful grin.

Theo laughed and shook his head, once more appearing impressed, only this time by her words rather than her skills.

“All right, then. Let’s give this a shot.

“I’m pretty sure you and I are going to have a lot more opportunities ahead to see who knows their way around a pistol better, but I’ll take my chances just now,” Theo said.

Without another word, he pulled his pistol in a flash and barely

seemed to aim before pulling the trigger in quick succession until his barrel was empty and the cans were gone.

He spun the gun around his finger and stuck it back in the holster with a motion so smooth, Willa knew he had practiced it a thousand times.

“It seems, indeed, that I’m not the only one who knows my way around things,” she said.

“I’ve had a long time to learn and nothing else to do,” he said.

Before Willa could say anything more, Theo glanced at her once and then drew the pistol with his left hand, repeating the exact same ritual, not missing a single shot and holstering his gun without incident.

At that, Willa’s jaw dropped. Theo looked at her with pride, clearly waiting for her to express how impressed she was.

“How did you do that? Left-handed? Are you ambidextrous?” she asked.

“Nope,” he replied.

“Then how? I can’t do anything like that with my left. I’ve tried a few times, but I’m awful and I just can’t seem to get a solid aim when I try.

“I always end up shooting too far to the right because I overcorrect. Not only that, but the pushback is too strong so I always end up shooting too high,” she explained.

“You have to brace yourself better,” he said.

Willa raised her eyebrow and pursed her lips. Did he really think she didn’t know that already? Of course, she had to brace herself! It didn’t mean she would suddenly be able to shoot perfectly.

“I know, I’m sorry,” he said, interpreting the look at once. “I’m sure you’re doing your best to do that, but it’s something you should really practice more.

“It’s so important to be able to shoot with either hand in case you find yourself in a tough situation. I’ve definitely had to shoot with my left before and there were times that ability saved my life.”

“It’s going to be a while before I can do that,” Willa said.

“Then you have to start practicing now. If I’ve been in a situation when I had to, it’s only a matter of time before you will, as well,” Theo warned.

Willa took a deep breath and drew her weapon, narrowing her eyes and looking at the cans in the distance while she switched the pistol to her left hand.

She made her usual calculations, considering the movement of the horse beneath her, the wind that was still stronger than the day before had been. She took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger.

Her left arm jerked back a hair and she shot too far to the left. Willa released a growl of disappointment.

“I thought you said you normally overcorrect to the right,” Theo said.

“I was trying to fix that problem. I suppose I tried too hard,” she said, hating that she was trying to impress him by making progress from what she had already warned him about.

“It takes time. I’m sure you’ll get it. But as for the kickback and going too high, you stiffen your arm too much.

“There’s a balance between keeping your arm steady versus just locking it in place so there’s no give,” Theo said.

“I don’t do it any differently than I do my right side,” Willa insisted.

Theo laughed and nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, Willa, you do. It’s very different. I can see how tense you are. If you ask me, the problem isn’t your ability to shoot with your left.

“The problem is that you get nervous when you shoot left-handed. You’re so tense,” he said.

“I’m not tense. I’ve never been tense while shooting. There’s no reason for me to be nervous,” she retorted, offended by his accusation.

“There’s nothing wrong with it, Willa. I’m just trying to encourage you to try loosening up a bit. Here, take my gun,” he said.

Willa was shocked. She couldn’t believe Theo was handing over his pistol and allowing her to take it.

He had been so angry when she’d taken it before that she imagined he would never let her so much as look at it again.

Nevertheless, Willa reached out and took it from him, weighing it in her hand and looking at the differences between his and her own. They were fairly similar and she was glad they could at least share bullets if they ever needed to.

“Now, I want you to try something,” Theo said. “Hold up both hands and aim. But don’t shoot yet.”

Willa did what he said, lifting her gun in her right hand and Theo’s in her left.

“Switch them,” he ordered.

She looked at him in confusion for a moment before he said it again more insistently.

“Just switch hands. My gun isn’t as familiar to you. It’s similar, but not the same. So, use that in your right hand where you already know

what you're doing," he urged.

It made sense and Willa switched the guns so that her own was in her left hand. She appreciated that it felt more familiar. At least she knew exactly how it felt when clutched in her fingers.

"All right, now try again. Aim, get both of them lined up exactly where you want," Theo said, riding closer and pulling the reins on her horse and his own so they stopped dead in their tracks along the road.

Although Willa was inclined to be annoyed that he was trying to make the circumstances easier for her, she was also grateful. This would certainly help, and that was the whole point of this.

She needed help. She needed Theo.

"Good. Aim your right hand first. Get it lined up and ready to shoot. Perfect. Now, aim the left at the can next to it. I want to see you get everything perfectly steady," he said.

Willa breathed slowly, in and out, as she aimed with her left. Just when she had everything as perfect as she thought it could be, Theo continued.

"See that?" he asked.

"See what?"

"Close your eyes," he said.

"Then I can't see anything," she retorted.

"Forgive my poor choice of words—it doesn't matter what you see. Now, close your eyes," he said, a hint of frustration in his tone.

Willa did as he said and continued waiting for him to tell her what to do next.

“It’s not about what you see. It’s about what you feel. Do you feel the difference in your right arm from your left?” he asked.

Willa focused on her limbs, on her elbows, on her fingers. She knew at once what he was saying and he was right. Her left arm was tense, shortened even. Her grip on the gun was stiff and rigid.

On the right, she was fluid. She could shift from one can to the next without a breath if she wanted to. Realizing this, she opened her eyes and looked at Theo.

He was grinning with near arrogance.

“I can see that you’re proud of yourself,” she said.

“Does that mean you can feel the difference?” he asked.

“It sure does. You were right; it does matter. I can tell that my left is far too rigid to be able to shoot properly,” she said.

“Go ahead and shoot. See what you come up with,” Theo said.

Willa fired the pistols and felt the immediate kickback from the left. The bullet overcorrected to the right and was far too high up. But the gun fired from her right hand found its target with ease.

She tried a few more times, focusing on loosening her left side. Rather than wasting bullets with her right, she simply aimed and compared how it felt before firing only from the left.

“I know we can’t waste time, but I’m finally getting it,” Willa said after a solid fifteen minutes of practice. They needed to set out and keep moving, but she was enjoying herself too much to quit.

“You’re doing great,” Theo replied. “But you’re right. We need to move on and we don’t want to use up all our ammunition with practice.

“Maybe tomorrow we can spend a little more time working on it,” he added.

“I would like that,” Willa replied.

She looked up at Theo, staring into his amber eyes. He smiled at her and they drew closer. His gaze fell to her lips and Willa felt her cheeks turning hot from his glance.

She wasn’t sure what he would do. It seemed like he was coming closer, like he might actually kiss her.

And she didn’t want to back away.

Although Willa was shocked by her desire to be kissed by Theo, she was disappointed when he chose to awkwardly shift away from her, looking at the ground with discomfort and leading his horse a few feet ahead. Willa watched him as he glanced back and nodded for them to move on.

“We really need to get going. We can’t risk the chance that Buck might have moved on before we reach the town,” he said.

“Oh,” Willa said, forlornly. “You’re right. We need to go. We’re taking too long.”

She followed behind Theo, trying not to live in the cloud of disappointment that she was under. There was no reason to be upset or discouraged. After all, why did she care?

Theo was annoying. Right? Hadn’t he bothered her a great deal and wasn’t he just in the way?

No matter how desperately she wanted to believe it, to think that she was better off not caring about him like this, Willa couldn’t help eyeing him with intrigue for the rest of the journey.

As it happened, she was coming to understand that Theo was exactly

the sort of man she didn't mind getting to know.

She smiled as she realized it was more than that. Theo was a bounty worth hunting.

## 19

It was quiet once they reached Mystic Springs. That was, until Willa saw the center of town up ahead.

There, beyond the prairie, things seemed bustling and full of energy. It was just the sort of place Willa imagined would be perfect for getting information.

“Looks like we’re just about there,” Theo said.

“Sure does. Do you think we’ll manage to find a decent boarding house in town? I’ve got to admit that this place seems to be a little wild.

“I’m hoping we have a chance to find a decent place where we don’t have to brawl just to find a decent room,” Willa said.

“Don’t you worry, I’m sure we will. More than likely, we’ll just need to search around a little while before we find the perfect inn—like that one,” Theo said, staring straight at a building up ahead with a sign out front to let them know it was ideal for their circumstances.

They rode forward to the livery stables outside the boarding house and Theo turned to Willa.

“Let me go in first. I’ll explain that my wife and I have been traveling and we’re not in our best condition,” he said.

“You think they’re going to look down on us? This is a pretty big town

and now that we're here, I'm thinking it might require a little more elegance than I expected," Willa confessed.

She'd already noted the women with their high-necked blouses and clean, pressed skirts. It felt more like being in a large city than a rough-and-tumble town like she'd imagined.

"I just think we ought to be prepared. And if we're going to the saloon for information, we're more likely to get it if we look decent than like we slept in a barn," Theo said.

Willa nodded and waited until Theo came back out.

"Come on. I got us a room, and we should go freshen up," he said.

Once they were inside with their belongings, Willa started digging through her pack for the nicest dress she had. It was mostly clean, and thankfully it was black along the bottom so she was able to scrub the dust out and it wasn't immediately clear that it was still wet.

"What do you think?" Willa asked Theo, nervous that he wouldn't approve of the dress she'd chosen and afraid to tell him it was the nicest she had.

"It's beautiful, I've never seen you wear something like that. You should go put it on. I need to get a nice clean shirt and my best trousers, and it's going to take me a few minutes to sort through everything," Theo said.

Willa nodded and took the dress and a white blouse behind the changing curtain. It took her a few minutes to get herself sorted, but by the time she was finished, she felt strangely comforted by her finery.

"Are you finished changing?" she called out to Theo.

"Sure am. You?"

Willa answered by coming around from the changing screen and Theo's eyes went wide and he blushed upon looking at her. He looked awfully nice in his white shirt and black trousers, even wearing a top hat upon his head.

"Goodness," he said, his breath catching.

Willa couldn't believe she was getting this reaction from him. She had never expected he would be this pleasant when noticing her or that he would respond with this level of sheepish delight.

As for her own response, Willa couldn't believe how much she was loving this reaction or what it meant to her to feel beautiful, even if it was just for this one moment in all her life.

She'd never been shown this level of respect or admiration.

Generally, when men leered at her, it was always with an intent of improper attention. Willa cringed whenever she thought about those men and she detested their admiration.

But this was different. Theo was looking at her with genuine care and a smile that told her he thought of her as better than that.

"I still don't really look like a city woman," she said, glancing down at herself.

In truth, if she was going to play the part fully, she needed jewelry of some sort. Maybe a comb for her hair or a ring on her finger. There were plenty of options, but nothing she owned.

"Don't you have anything pretty? Earrings, maybe?" Theo asked.

Willa shook her head and gave a shrug. "Not really. I never bought myself jewelry. It didn't seem necessary for the work I do.

"I always figured that if I needed to look nice, I could make it work with whatever I had. But the idea of spending my hard-earned money

on a trinket that I wouldn't really get to enjoy?

"That never made much sense to me," she confessed.

"It's a shame. I'll bet you would look striking with a nice piece of jewelry. Something silver or gold.

"You look worthy of it and no one would expect anything less of such a pristine, city woman like you," Theo said with a grin.

"Oh, hush. You and I both know that I'm not all that fine and fancy. I wish I could say that I look like I belong in a place like this, but it's never been enough of a concern for me that I made the effort.

"I expect you don't have that problem. You must always be ready to play the gentleman if you need to," she said.

"Me? A gentleman?" Theo scoffed. "I never expected you to call me that. You know as well as I do that I'm not exactly the sort of fella who goes around in a suit on his way to the bank."

Willa grinned and for a long moment, her eyes locked with Theo's. They leaned into one another's gaze as though they were meant to have this moment, meant to share whatever it was they were each thinking and feeling.

Willa understood that there was a whole lot at stake. She expected Theo knew it as well, but it didn't mean they couldn't indulge in this little game they were playing, in this attempt to pretend they were married for the sake of finding Wild Buck.

Of course, when all this came to an end, Willa was afraid she would sink into the disappointment of knowing that none of it was forever.

"So, if you don't have any jewelry, there is a little something that might help," Theo said, his mood changing to something a good deal more serious.

“Oh? What’s that?”

He started going through his pack again and Willa saw the questions swirling in his mind. It seemed Theo was nervous, like he wasn’t sure if he was doing the right thing.

It didn’t make sense to Willa that he would do anything he was uncertain of. After all, Theo didn’t seem like the kind of person who cared about anything unless it was a sure bet.

And when he pulled out a little black bag from the bottom of his pack, she was more curious than ever. Turning to her, Theo let out a long, slow exhale.

“This is something I have carried around for a good long while,” he said.

“Oh?”

“It… it was my mother’s,” he explained. “And I’ve been carrying it around for quite a long time. I don’t know if this will help you or anything, but you should at least try it and see if you like it.”

Willa froze and stared at Theo. She didn’t want to take anything so precious, something that had belonged to his mother.

She had a dreadful feeling that if she was going to take something, she shouldn’t take anything valuable.

But Theo opened the little black bag and a beautiful silver necklace poured out. At once, Willa saw that it was dotted with fine, bluish pearls.

It must have cost a great deal of money and she wondered why he would consider giving it to her instead of keeping it or selling it.

“I think it would look nice on you. And it makes sense that if anyone is going to wear it, or if there’s anyone who should have it, you’re the

one I'd like to give it to," Theo said.

"Oh, Theo…" Willa said, trailing off. He held it out to her but she couldn't take it. Not yet.

"What's wrong? You don't like it?" he asked nervously.

"It's not that. Believe me, I think the necklace is beautiful. But that's just it. This is a very precious thing, something from your mother.

"You haven't told me anything about her but I'm sure if this is all you have of her, it must be very important to you. I can't take something so valuable," Willa said.

"Please. I insist. You should have this, Willa. You should wear it today and any time you want to. I can't bring myself to sell it and it's just sitting in the bottom of my things, doing nothing," he said.

"But there may be…" Willa trailed off. How could she talk about that?

How could she suggest that there might be another woman one day? A woman he might fall in love with, and whom he would want to have the necklace. It wasn't fair to take it from such a woman.

"Willa, please take the necklace," he urged with even more insistence. "I promise you, there's no one else I want to give it to."

With her heart racing in her chest, Willa reached out and took the necklace in her hands. For a moment, she gazed upon it, amazed at how lovely it was and the way it sparkled.

It was striking in every way and she was overcome by her fortune in getting to have something like this when she felt she didn't deserve it at all.

Still, she was nervous to actually wear it. Why had he been so generous with her? Why was Theo letting her have something this precious?

She didn't understand, but Willa took it with joy and undid the clasp before placing the jewelry upon her neck. She reached to the back and fiddled for a moment, trying to close the clasp.

"Here, let me help you," Theo offered, coming over and assisting her with it. Willa's hands were starting to shake, having him so close by.

She didn't know what to expect, but this certainly wasn't what she'd anticipated from Theo. Ever.

"Thank you," Willa said, shyly. Glancing in the mirror, she saw that Theo was eyeing the back of her neck with a smile.

When he looked up, their eyes met in the mirror and it was wonderful to catch him in that moment, looking at her the way he had been just moments before.

Things really were changing between them. It had taken a few days for them to warm up to one another, but now Willa was feeling as though she had everything she needed from Theo.

She felt she was seeing him for who he truly was, at last. For the first time, she knew the man with whom she'd been traveling, and it made all the difference.

"The necklace is beautiful," she said once it was on, turning to face Theo instead of just seeing his reflection in the mirror.

"And it looks beautiful on you, just as I expected," he replied.

"I hope I can do it justice. I know it's special to you. I wouldn't want your mother to feel that you'd given it to someone unworthy. Do you really think it looks all right?" she asked.

"I think my mother would be thrilled to know it had gone to someone who deserves it. Someone who is naturally beautiful and who can make the pearls shine.

“You aren’t like any other woman I’ve known, but I think that only adds to the look of the necklace,” he said.

Although he hadn’t worded it with the delicacy that some men might, Willa knew Theo was giving her a strong compliment. He meant what he said.

He clearly thought she was the right woman to wear this. And if he believed Willa was worthy of the necklace, maybe it meant he thought she was worthy of him, as well.

## 20

As they left the inn, Theo couldn't stop looking over at Willa.

She was beautiful when covered in dust, wearing that tan dress with the matching hat.

She was beautiful with the look of fury on her face whenever he had teased her—or when he'd blatantly insulted her.

And she was beautiful now.

From the black pinafore dress she wore over a white blouse, to the necklace adding an element of class and wealth, to the shoes she had shined so diligently to present herself as a lady, everything about Willa was striking.

The necklace had meant so much to Theo for such a long time. He smiled at Willa once more, although she couldn't see him as she was walking slightly ahead. But Theo didn't mind.

He got to watch her, to indulge in this moment of simply observing the woman who had stormed into his life and wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

But when they had nearly reached the saloon, Willa turned to Theo, her eyes filled with determination.

"I ought to go in alone," she said.

"What? What do you mean?" he asked, immediately frustrated by this.

He couldn't understand why she would make such a suggestion. If anyone was going in alone, it would be him, and he didn't need Willa thinking anything different.

"I think I'm the one with the better chance of getting information, and no one will talk to me if I come in with a fancy man on my arm," Willa said.

"I beg your pardon? What are you talking about, Willa? That makes no sense. I—"

"We're here because Wild Buck has gone after a woman, Theo. You think you're going to get information from anyone in there? Certainly not.

"We need to talk to the women, and they're far more likely to speak with me than with you. Unless, of course, you intend to hire them," she said, adding the last part with a slight flare of her nostrils, as though the idea bothered her greatly.

"Well, that's quite a thing to say," he muttered.

"Which means you don't intend to hire them. And if you aren't going to hire them, you need to realize that they won't likely talk to you about anything.

"Come on, Theo, you know I'm right. They're women and they will only want to share information with another woman, someone like them," she said.

"I disagree, Willa," he stated flatly. Why couldn't she see that he was every bit as useful as she was?

And why did she think that he would even consider sending her in there without his help? He wasn't going to put her in that position.

Unless she was planning to betray him. Maybe she thought Buck would be in there and she could take him down on her own.

Would she do that? Would she toss Theo aside without a thought?

He was suddenly overcome by insecurity, wondering if he'd made a mistake. If he had just given Willa the chance to storm in and take down Wild Buck without Theo being there, it was certainly going to cause a problem.

Not only for Buck, not only for Theo, but for Willa herself.

"Theo, I'm going in there. I'm going to take care of this and I don't want you getting in the way," Willa said, continuing in her firm determination.

"But that's nonsense! Think about it. If you were a lady of the night—not that I would ever suggest that you are—wouldn't you be thrilled to give a man information instead of…instead of the alternative?" he asked, pointing out the logic.

"If I happened to be that kind of woman, I would be far more inclined to lie to a man who thinks he can buy me off for anything. Those women are viewed as a commodity as it is already.

"You think they want to sell another part of themselves? That they would just happily trade you their minds or their friends? That's ridiculous, Theo. They aren't going to do that," she insisted.

"Why would they open up to you? They don't even know you and you're planning on just going in and asking them about Buck?" he asked her with frustration.

"If they think I'm heartbroken enough, they'll tell me everything. These women understand the betrayal of a man and they won't fight me if I suggest that I've experienced just that," she told him.

"So, you want them to think you're messing around with Buck? Wouldn't they just be furious at you for getting him to betray their friend?" he asked.

“I never said I’m going to suggest that I have had a relationship with that man. I’m no fool.

“Though, if they were to make that assumption, they would be mad at Wild Buck and not me, so long as I claimed to know nothing of his other women. But that’s beside the point,” Willa continued.

“What I’m saying is that women will talk to other women. We know how to open up to one another if we think it’s for the best. I just have to convince them that I’m worth talking to.”

Willa was her usual, determined self as she said this. Theo saw in her eyes that she believed it was the only way and that she intended to go in there and tell those women how it was going to be, whether they liked it or not.

He couldn’t let her do that. More than anything, Theo knew Buck wouldn’t let himself be caught with the types of women who would so easily sell his whereabouts.

And certainly not to a beautiful woman like Willa, dressed in finery and looking so poised and desirable.

“And I just have to tell them that I’m hiring one of them for an hour. Then, when I have her alone, I can ask her all about Buck and she’ll answer because it means she doesn’t have to do other things with me,” Theo said.

He noticed that Willa blushed and couldn’t make eye contact when he spoke about that and Theo was secretly proud to think she would grow shy on that topic with him.

She had previously been so bold in regards to discussions considered unladylike. It meant it was starting to bother her to imagine him alone with a saloon girl at all.

But Theo tried not to be too flattered. He still had a mission and he was fighting to try and get Willa on track, to make her understand

why he was working so hard to get her to listen.

If she would relent and do what he said, maybe they would get the answers they needed and then they could just move on altogether.

“Look, we’re almost at the saloon. We need to make a decision, and I have already made it,” he said.

She raised her eyebrow in surprise, as though daring him to refuse her. But Theo had already decided and even if Willa didn’t like it, she would still have to go along with his plan because it was the only real option they had.

“Oh? You’ve already made a decision that affects both of us?

“One that ought to be made by us together? You’re telling me you’ve already decided and I’m just supposed to go along with it?” Willa scoffed.

Her anger was palpable, but Theo had to let it go, to accept that she wasn’t going to be happy no matter what he did in that moment.

This was the decision he’d made because not only was it the best way to get information, it was also the best way he could ensure she didn’t get to Buck without him.

“Exactly. This is what we’re going to do, understand? We’re doing it my way and that’s final. We are going in there and you will keep back and let me do what I need to do for information,” Theo said.

He stopped in his tracks to make sure Willa was listening and that she would relent and do exactly as he instructed.

She stood there, glaring at him with fury in her gaze. Yes, she was beautiful even when she was angry, but Theo hated that she looked at him with such contempt.

Why couldn’t he make her see that this was for the best? And why was

he failing so miserably at his duties? Was it possible that he was making things worse?

An hour ago, they'd shared such a sweet moment in their room at the inn. They had been close, close enough that he had touched her skin and felt her warmth.

They'd been huddled under a tree not so long ago, with Willa sleeping on his shoulder, growing ever more comfortable by the day. They had even slept in the same bed already, and there was no way to be closer to one another than that.

So why was it that this little disagreement was enough to turn Willa against him altogether? Why was she so angry now?

It felt as though that sweet moment had never taken place, that it never existed. She was already lost to Theo and he couldn't bear it.

A part of him wanted to go back to that morning, to rush her to the inn and beg her forgiveness for having wounded her pride and making her angry.

And yet, he knew it would make no difference at all. Willa was angry at him and she wasn't about to let that go. More than ever, he knew he had gotten himself into a frustrating situation in which he was falling for the one woman who really challenged him.

Willa was silent and turned her gaze from Theo to the double doors of the saloon. He took it as permission to move forward and he decided to go ahead and execute his plan as best he could.

He expected that she was just going to charge in after him or maybe even jump ahead of him so she could steal the show and tell everyone that they were there to find Buck and not to trust Theo.

If Willa was trying to take control of all this and get Theo out of the way, it was the perfect time to do it. Nevertheless, Theo wanted to trust her.

He wanted to believe that she wouldn't betray him, that she wouldn't senselessly kill Buck without another thought.

Then again, he realized, that idea was born out of paranoia and didn't make a whole lot of sense. If Willa hadn't wanted to let him be, she would have told him.

She certainly knew how to use her words. If he'd learned anything, it was that she was unashamed of sharing her displeasure.

But once they were inside, Theo was surprised that Willa didn't follow him far beyond the doors. Instead, when he turned around to look for her, he saw her at the bar counter, trying to get the barkeep's attention.

Theo observed as she nodded to a bottle and the barkeep poured her a drink.

Willa turned and faced him, glowering in her obedience. It was clear she didn't want to be there, in the position he'd pushed her into. But there she was, nevertheless.

Theo was grateful Willa hadn't decided to fight him on this, that she was being patient. That she was allowing him to have a say.

He gave her a nod, which she didn't return. Instead, she was caught up by the barkeep, who brought her water, as well.

And with that, Theo made his way to where the women stood, gathered together, awaiting their customers.

Knowing that he had to get information, Theo was ready to jump right in and start talking, but he couldn't help continually looking back at Willa. He wondered if he'd made the wrong decision.

And yet, his pride would allow him to do nothing else. He had no choice anymore. He had to start talking—that was the only way to prove to her that he was right.

## 21

Theo trudged on over to the working ladies. He smelled their perfumes from a distance and it nearly forced him to take a step back, but he moved forward regardless, knowing he had little choice but to question them.

And once they looked up and spotted him drawing near, Theo knew he couldn't back out of this now.

"Oh, and who is this fella?" One woman giggled flirtatiously, leaning forward so her cleavage spilled from the low-cut bodice.

Theo darted his attention up toward her face in an effort to avoid looking and to ensure that no one caught him doing so. He looked at her cheeks, covered in rouge, and her mouth that betrayed a false hue of pink.

The two shades dramatically contrasted and he quickly noticed that all of the women must have shared their color as they appeared nearly identical.

"Step back, girls, this one is mine," another woman insisted, pushing forward.

Theo took a deep breath and glanced at Willa. She was still glaring at him and he couldn't blame her.

She probably thought he was only doing this for the attention of the women and a chance to flirt with them. She couldn't possibly have

known this was nothing he wanted right now.

“Sorry, ladies, I’m not here for any indulgences on my part. I’m here to ask a few questions,” he said.

While he was trying to remember his reason for coming to talk to them, Theo was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake, after all.

Was Willa right? Was he a fool for trying to take control and lead the conversation?

Doubt crept into the back of his mind, making Theo wish he’d given more time to consider what Willa had wanted, the things she’d said.

Sure, he hated to think she might have been right about her suggestions, but was it right of him to simply shake his head and refuse to listen?

Couldn’t he have taken the time to hear what she had to say?

Theo couldn’t help himself. He looked back at Willa once more. This time, what he saw was more than just irritation or a desire to be in control.

What was that look? Was she angry with him? Or was it more? Was she… jealous? And if it was, indeed, jealousy… what did that mean?

Was it possible that she had begun to care for him?

Theo scolded himself for the thought. He couldn’t allow his mind to wander to that place.

It would be a terrible idea, falling for Willa, and it was an even worse idea to let her fall for him—or even to hope for it. She would only wind up heartbroken.

And he would, too.

“Oh, please, you really ought to spend some time with me. We can have a grand hour together, one you would never, ever forget. Believe me,” a third woman said suggestively.

Theo didn’t need any hints as to what she was thinking. Among the eight ladies who were swarming him, each one had her own way of attempting to bait him.

Theo didn’t want to insult them, but he couldn’t let them believe he would actually want to be with any of them for even a moment. Not when he knew what sort of women they were.

And not with Willa so nearby.

“No, no. I need information. That’s all. And I am more than willing to pay for it,” he said.

“But information isn’t half so fun as… other things,” a sweet, younger woman said.

As Theo looked closer, she really did look quite young. Younger than any woman should have to be for such a line of work.

He felt a tug at his heart, wondering how she’d ended up like this, covered in rouge to look older so she could make some money.

“You,” he said, pointing to her. “What’s your name?”

The young woman smirked and the others grimaced, clearly jealous that Theo had made a choice as to whom he was going to hire.

“You don’t need to know her name. She’s new at this and doesn’t know all the tricks the rest of us do. Especially me.

“I’m the one with the most experience here. I can give you anything you want,” one insisted.

“That’s a lie! I’m far better than she is,” argued the first woman who

had spoken.

“Listen, mister, I’ll let you ask me anything you want,” another said. “There’s nothing you can’t pry out of me.

“And whether you want to talk or if that’s just how you like to get things started, I really don’t mind. I’ll be there for you. No matter what.”

“I really appreciate that, but I have a feeling that she is the one who can help me,” Theo said.

A younger woman not only needed more help, but she was also more likely to talk. If she thought Theo would give her money, she would be more inclined to give him answers.

Not only that, but she wouldn’t have bonded with the others enough to show the loyalty the older ones probably had. A younger woman tended to be looser-lipped, he’d found.

She was more inclined to talking and gossiping, and he’d found more than a few bounties by asking the right younger females.

“Excuse me, ladies,” Theo said, waving them away with his hand and looking directly at the young woman. “What’s your name?”

“May. My name is May,” she said, grinning brightly. “And you shouldn’t listen to them. I am quite the lady, and you will find that out soon enough.”

“Well, May, I would like to spend some time with you. I’m hoping you have the information I need,” Theo said.

“I’ll bet she does,” one woman hissed under her breath.

May came forward and took Theo’s hand, looking up at him as though she had just been handed a real diamond necklace instead of the paste ones that hung lazily around her collarbone.

He turned back to look at Willa, who seemed deeply disappointed. Theo knew she was thinking the wrong thing, but he couldn't worry about that too much just now.

They were there for a job and he needed to get this over with. The rest would have to be discussed another time.

Theo took May upstairs and she led him to her room. She closed the door behind him and then turned to face him, her body pressed against the door.

She was clearly new to seduction and that was a relief to Theo, giving him hope that she hadn't been hardened by this work just yet.

"At last, we're alone," she said with a girlish laugh.

"Yes, but that isn't important. I didn't bring you here for that," he said. "I just want to talk to you."

"That's what every man says. You should try a new trick because I'm not going to fall for something so silly.

"The girls have told me that every time a man says he just wants to talk, it usually means he wants something extra special," May said, her expression strained.

It appeared she wanted to maintain her feminine demeanor, but was growing suspicious of Theo.

"May, how old are you?" Theo asked.

She paused and pursed her lips before answering succinctly. "Twenty," she replied.

"That's a lie and we both know it. I'm thinking sixteen or seventeen?" he asked.

"Seventeen, but almost eighteen," she relented.

“You shouldn’t be doing this work. And as a matter of fact, I want to give you a little extra money, but I’m not here to do anything unsavory,” he said with compassion.

He was terribly uncomfortable and didn’t want her to do anything more that would put him in an awkward position. Already, he just wanted to get out of there.

“You wouldn’t be the first to make that claim. I’ve been doing this for just over a week and I already had a few fellas tell me they’d rather make an honest woman out of me and just marry me,” she said, leaning forward to show off her bosom.

“I’m not here for that, either,” Theo insisted, shifting awkwardly away from her. “I just want to know about Dove and her fella, Wild Buck.”

May’s expression grew cold and hard. It was clear she was bothered by this, but Theo couldn’t understand why. There was no reason for her to get so upset.

“Get out of here,” she growled.

“What? Why? What’s wrong?” Theo asked.

“I said get out of here. I didn’t know you were bringing me up here just to ask me something that’s going to get me killed,” she said with fury.

“I don’t understand, May. Why would this get you killed? Are you saying that Dove would hurt you? Or Buck?

“If you’ve only been doing this for a week, are you really sure you know them enough to decide whether or not you’re safe?” he challenged her, although Theo suspected she was right and it would be dangerous for her to share this kind of information.

“I said, get out of here! I won’t tell you anything. You need to leave. I can’t let you put me in this kind of a position and I won’t. If you don’t

leave, I'll make you leave," she seethed.

Theo took in the sight of the young woman. She was so petite and there was no way she could force him to leave. Not only that, but he still wanted to help her if he could.

Of course, nothing was more important in that moment than getting information. He couldn't give up just because she'd gotten a little bit spooked.

Once she realized he was a decent man, she would lighten up and tell him about Buck.

"If you help me, I will be able to keep you safe. I can make sure Wild Buck never comes anywhere near you—"

"I told you to git! I'm not telling you anything," she shouted again.

"I won't tell anybody that it was you who told me. I promise. You will be safe, May! I won't let anything happen to you," Theo insisted.

But it was too late and May was already overcome. She rushed to the door and yanked it open before crying out for help.

"He won't pay! He's refusing to pay and he won't leave!" she yelled.

"What? Why are you saying that? You know I didn't—"

Before Theo could say anything more, two large men barged into the room and came at Theo. He backed up with his hands out in front of him, as if surrendering, but there was nothing he could do.

"Get out of here," one of the men said, grabbing Theo by the arm. The other fella stayed silent as he took Theo's left arm and the two started dragging him.

"No, it's not true! I was just trying to talk to her. I didn't mean anything by it," he insisted as the men hauled him down the steps and

through the saloon.

The crowd of people laughed and jeered at him, shouting in support of the rugged fellas that were trying to get rid of Theo.

They reached the door and the men gave Theo a hard shove. He lost his balance and went tumbling through the swinging doors into the dust outside.

He could hear the chorus of cheering from everyone inside who had enjoyed the show of Theo getting kicked out and humiliated all for the sake of his attempt to glean information.

Theo sighed as he slowly stood and dusted off his clothing. But it only matted into his black waistcoat and he knew it was useless.

He'd been a fool for trying to look like a decent fella and it only got him here. It had all been a mistake.

But the worst was yet to come. The moment Theo saw Willa's shoes stepping through the swinging doors and outside to meet him, he knew he was about to face a whole new kind of wrath.

Theo looked up at Willa, observing how she stood there with a stern look on her face and her drink in hand. He feared the glass might break under her grip.

"Well… I suppose that didn't work out too well, now, did it?" he asked her, nervously.

Willa stared him down for a long moment.

And then, he prepared for her fury.

## 22

Willa was still fuming after the ridiculous stunt Theo had just pulled. She tried to push aside the nonsensical concerns in her mind that Theo might have actually tried something with that girl.

After all, it was none of Willa's business even if he had, other than the fact that they needed the money for information more than other activities.

But this wasn't about that. It wasn't about petty jealousies or whether or not Theo had been attracted to that young woman.

This was about his inability to listen to or to trust Willa when she really did know what was best for them. She'd had a great option and if only he'd been able to consider it for a moment, he would come to realize that she was the ideal person to get information from the women.

Why wouldn't he give her a chance?

"All right," Theo said. "I have a feeling I'm about to get an earful after what I've just done, but you should know that I suffered a good deal of humiliation already and I'm also a bit sore."

"You think I care about that?" Willa asked in anger.

Theo looked down, clearly unhappy that she was coming at him about this. Still, Willa couldn't let it go. She didn't understand how he'd been so irresponsible as to lose this chance for them.

“I know you’re mad, but you need to think about this. I was just trying to get the information we needed.

“That girl was willing to talk, but once I mentioned Buck, she said I was going to get her killed. She just misunderstood me,” he said.

“You think she would have spoken to you if it was about something else? No. I told you, it doesn’t work that way.

“She would have been suspicious of you no matter what you had gone over there for, but of course learning that it was about Wild Buck—what did you expect?” Willa asked in frustration.

“I expected her to be reasonable and know that I would protect her from Buck if he ever tried to hurt her.

“And I was going to give her most of the money we have left so that she could escape and get out of this work. I was doing the noble thing,” Theo insisted.

“Don’t try to be a hero when you have a history of looking out only for yourself,” Willa spat.

Theo looked down again in shame, clearly upset that Willa had made the accusation that he was no sort of hero. But it was the truth and she couldn’t apologize for it.

Whatever had caused Theo to think he had changed, that he was going to help that girl, Willa wondered why he would then treat her with such disdain and contempt?

“You’re right, I suppose, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m trying to do the right thing, Willa,” he said.

“But it wasn’t the right thing. Not at all. You hurt our chances of finishing this. Don’t you know what’s at stake?

“Don’t you know that not only do we need the money, but that we are

also the only chance of getting Wild Buck put in jail or gotten rid of however it might come?" she asked.

"Why do you say it that way? Are you that desperate to kill him?" Theo asked accusingly.

"Don't try to turn this around on me just because you're embarrassed about your mistake. I know you don't like my methods and you think I'm too inclined to hurt that man, but it's no excuse," she said.

"Isn't it? I don't want you charging at him and killing him if he comes peacefully," Theo said, shifting the topic.

Willa wasn't going to let him do this. They were arguing about trust, not about methods. He couldn't just start talking about something else altogether.

Not when Willa was this hurt by his actions.

"We can discuss how to handle him another time. At least, we could have.

"I don't know anymore. I'm not sure it's such a good idea for us to work together if you can't even trust me enough to listen," Willa said.

"What?" Theo asked in surprise, taking a step toward her. "You're saying you don't want to work together now?"

He looked hurt by the rejection and Willa wasn't sure she was ready to give up on him entirely. Theo still had a chance to make things right and she wanted him to take it.

She wanted him to make everything better.

"All I'm saying is that you should consider whether you really want to work with me and if you are going to do the right thing," she said.

"I know I upset you by going to her. I didn't mean to get kicked out!"

he shouted defensively.

“Theo, you really did make a mistake, and it wasn’t simply getting kicked out of the saloon or messing up our chance at getting information from that girl.

“Your mistake was not trusting me or believing that I might actually have a good plan and know what to do,” she said, trying to put all her emotions into the anger she felt.

Willa didn’t want Theo to see how hurt she was. Mostly, she just didn’t want to admit it to herself.

It was infuriating to know that he could wound her like this, that she could be so saddened by him and feel so betrayed.

Why wasn’t Theo taking her seriously? Did he really believe Willa wasn’t important enough to be heard? She had so many skills and Theo had already proven that he needed her.

Why wasn’t he giving her a chance to make decisions and show how diligent and capable she was?

“I’m sorry, Willa. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, but I thought this was the best choice. I didn’t know what else to do.

“These girls normally trust a man like me and I thought I could convince her to tell me,” he said.

“Well, that’s nonsense. And at the end of it all, it comes down to the fact that you ruined our chances purely because you don’t trust me.

“You don’t believe I’m able to do this and if we are working together, you need to figure that out,” she said, tensing her jaw, her brows knitting together in anguish.

“Willa—”

“No, I don’t want to hear it. I listened to you enough before, telling me you were doing the right thing and I was foolish for believing you.

“I thought you knew what you were doing, that you were making the right call. You seemed so passionate about it. I didn’t like it and I was offended, but I wanted to trust you,” she said.

“The fact is, you never even took a moment to consider that maybe I was worth trusting, as well. We can’t work together if you won’t believe in me,” she added.

Theo was quiet for a long moment. He stared at the ground and steadied his breathing before he looked back up at her, his own pain visible in his eyes.

“Willa, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry… but I just don’t work that way.”

It was an answer. Not the answer she wanted or expected or even needed, but it was an answer nonetheless.

Willa couldn’t believe that this was all Theo would give her. Didn’t she deserve more than this from him? Was an apology genuine if it was followed by but?

It seemed more like an excuse or a rationalization to her. And when she really thought about it, Willa understood that this was where things had been heading all along.

Theo never meant to truly look after her. All he wanted was a chance to do things on his own, to impress her without even making an effort.

He hadn’t cared a bit as to whether or not Willa would get hurt in the process. All that mattered to Theo had been his own pride.

“You don’t work that way? Do you think that matters to me? You agreed that we would do this together.

“I know I made things tough on you but, ultimately, it was your own choice to come along with me. If you didn’t want to, I wasn’t going to force you. I even gave you your gun back,” she said.

“I know that, but it doesn’t change that this is who I am. You’re right about a lot of things.

“I should have learned to trust you and I ought to have given more thought to what you wanted, but it’s safer this way,” Theo said.

“What do you mean by that? How is it safer that you get thrown out of a saloon with everyone laughing at you?

“How is that good for you at all? You say it’s safer?” she asked, furious he would word it like that.

“Yes, because—”

“I have been taking care of myself for a very long time, Theo. I didn’t need you back then and I don’t need you taking care of me now.

“I’m not safer just because you decided to be the fool who tried to question a woman and you ignored me in the process,” she said.

“Willa, I really am sorry, all right? I’m not used to working with someone else,” he said, clearly vexed.

Was she being too hard on him? Maybe so, but she couldn’t get past the hurt and betrayal she felt, knowing he’d tossed her aside for his own, failed strategy.

Her anger was clouding her judgment, but she needed to know that Theo would eventually learn to trust her and be willing to consider her ideas.

She had to know if he would ever respect her, if he would ever trust her.

“Theo, I need to know the truth,” she said.

He looked up at her with panic in his eyes at the question. She sensed that he was desperate to avoid anything that meant opening up to her. Still, she needed an answer.

“Do you think you will ever be able to trust me?”

Theo flinched and then exhaled slowly. For a moment, she thought he was relieved to answer her, but then she realized he was relieved by something else.

Maybe he had expected a different question. Maybe he was glad to have this out in the open. Or maybe he just wanted her to stop talking.

Willa waited, knowing that she had really started to like him. Her feelings for Theo had gone from irritation to curiosity to amusement and now… now, she cared for him deeply.

At times, she felt he admired her, as well, but then he would turn around in an instant and become this strange creature.

He was unrecognizable from the man he had been that afternoon at the inn. That was a man who was tender and thoughtful, someone who saw Willa as more than either an outcast or a fantasy.

He’d treated her exactly as she was. He’d treated her as Willa.

Things had shifted so dramatically in a short time. And when Willa tried to draw back, to see all of this from the surface, she thought maybe she really had gotten too angry.

But she also saw that none of this could work if he didn’t just learn to be honest with her.

And as she stood there, waiting for Theo to answer, she figured out his response without even needing him to say a word.

Theo had taken too long. He still wasn't sure about her. He wasn't sure he trusted her.

That was the only answer she needed.

"Fine then," she grumbled, looking away so she could hide the weight of her emotions. "I'm going to handle this myself now.

"Since you aren't welcome back in the saloon, I guess you'll just have to figure out something else to do."

She started for the saloon, but Theo called after her.

"Wait, Willa! What are you doing? Don't do this. We can still work together," he insisted.

"No," she replied, turning on him. "No, we can't. Just go back to the boarding house. I can't concentrate on everything I need to do if I'm stuck here with you watching me.

"You didn't even answer my question, Theo. You don't trust me and you never will. This was all a waste."

She didn't give him another chance to stop her. Willa bolted back into the saloon, determined that she would finish all of this by herself.

She didn't need Theo. She never had needed him. A few days ago, this foolishness between them was a matter of her desperation, but she knew better now.

Willa wasn't used to putting herself in this position. She didn't put herself out there or try to make friends. She didn't allow herself to trust others.

And all of this, the whole foolish decision, was just another reminder that she should never do it again.

## 23

Willa laughed, raising a hand to the barkeep to signal that she and the girls needed another round of drinks. As long as she kept them coming, Willa knew she was going to have friends.

“What about that one there?” Willa asked, nodding to a fella seated a short distance away.

He was eyeing the women with a smirk and wasn’t quite as hideous as some of the other men who had come in.

But one of the girls leaned her head closer into the circle, clearly trying to speak in confidence.

“Don’t waste your time on that one,” she said. “I’ve had the misfortune of… learning just what a disappointment he is.”

She said it in such a suggestive manner that Willa understood what the girl was saying. That particular man clearly hadn’t been as skilled as some of the other clients she’d had.

“All men are a disappointment. Some are just easier to spot,” Willa replied.

The barkeep brought the drinks over and the girls were quiet for a moment, smiling at one another as if sharing a secret. Willa gathered that they didn’t want the barkeep to hear their comments berating the men they had serviced.

Once he was gone, however, they immediately jumped back into the conversation.

“What about him?” Willa asked.

“Charlie? He’s just a boy. He wouldn’t hire any of us. He’d rather marry Betty and take her away from this life,” one woman said.

All the girls joined in laughter and a true blush showed under Betty’s elaborate makeup.

“He’s a nice fella and I think he would make a fine husband,” she said.

“Then why don’t you run off with him?” Willa asked, lazily taking a swig from her cup as the other girls rolled their eyes at the question.

“They’d never make it,” said Marianne. “They haven’t got enough money between them and no skills other than the ones they currently perform. Trust me, Betty knows she’s better off making a living and taking care of herself.”

“She can’t do both? I’ve heard of more than a few ladies who have a fella looking after them outside of their work,” Willa said.

“Sure, there are plenty of them. But for a boy like Charlie who isn’t even able to look after himself, how’s he going to look after Betty?”

Betty was clearly discouraged. Still, Willa couldn’t waste time on pity. She was asking her questions for a reason.

“I suppose you’re right. Not everyone can be like Dove and find a man who can always be there for her, giving her whatever she wants whenever she wants it,” Willa said, dropping the name into the conversation rather flippantly and without a care.

The girls immediately tensed and shifted uncomfortably. They glanced at one another and Willa took a drink as if she hadn’t noticed any change.

This was exactly what she'd been hoping for. This was how she could get the girls to share a little bit of information and actually get the answers she was looking for.

After a moment, she looked back at them with a confused expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"What do you know about Dove?" Betty asked.

"Hmm? I met her once, just a few weeks ago. She was in Martinville and we started talking. She said I should come for a visit here and that's actually why I came to the saloon.

"I thought I'd find her. Since she's not here, I'm guessing she's either with a client or she's with her fella," Willa said, nonchalantly.

"Don't listen to Dove," Marianne said, darkly.

"What do you mean by that?" Willa asked with a scoff.

"She's been running around with a pretty bad fella lately," Betty said. "Trust me, none of us wants her near him."

"He's absolutely awful," May said in a hushed whisper.

Willa maintained her cover, trying to play dumb so the women would share more information. It was clear that they were all uncomfortable with Wild Buck, but no one was willing to tell her much.

"Well, that worries me," she said.

"It worries all of us," Marianne said. "It worries us, but there's not a whole lot we can do. He pays us pretty well to keep quiet."

"He pays you?" she asked, feigning surprise.

The women nodded, sadly. Willa understood her crossroads. She certainly wanted to say what was on her mind, to ask them all the questions she had and beg them for answers.

But that wouldn't work, not at a time like this. She needed to be careful, needed to wait.

If she tried to dig too deep, the women would get suspicious about her motives, and then they would get scared.

Theo had already made the mistake of losing their trust. Now, Willa had no choice but to bide her time and build confidence with these women.

If she could do that, perhaps she would manage to get some truth out of them. Only then would she be able to hunt Wild Buck down and get this over with.

Already, she had made progress, finding out that Wild Buck was bribing these women and, because of that, she knew they must have information worth a whole lot of money.

That was more than encouraging. It was exhilarating.

"Well, it really is a shame. Dove seemed so happy when she told me about him. I guess I was wrong. Either that or she's just scared and doesn't think she can get away from him," Willa said, eyeing the girls for either confirmation or denial of that assumption.

Instead, she was merely met with uncertainty.

It seemed the girls weren't going to say much more, nor were they going to drink anything else. Willa realized she needed to change her tactic.

She had been trying to get them to have a little too much alcohol so one or two of them might share some information with her, but it was time to break out something special she'd been keeping in her

belongings, something she'd always known might come in handy eventually.

"Ladies, would you excuse me for just a moment? I have a little surprise that I think you would like.

"Something from the city that I've been dying to try out and I expect you girls could show me just how to use it," she said.

It had been weeks since Willa had bought some nice cosmetics in the city. A part of her had expected that she might be required to use them, trying to make herself look rich and fancy—or having to blend in with the working ladies and pretend to be one herself.

As it was, she hadn't ever done much undercover work like this, but she had thought about what a nice change it would be, as well as how much easier it might be to get information.

Now, she didn't need to use the products to make herself appear as a saloon girl, but she did need them to build camaraderie with the girls.

It was a subtle bribe, in many ways. She was finding a way to prove that she was worthy of their trust, that she understood the pull toward beauty.

Of course, most people wouldn't have expected that when they saw Willa in her normal clothing. She never tried to come across as anything special and felt foolish even now when she wore this finery.

But this was precisely what the girls needed if they were going to start talking.

With the suspense hanging in the air, Willa made her way out the front doors of the saloon and found Theo waiting there with the horses.

"How did it go? Did you get the information?" he asked in earnest.

Willa simply flashed him a glare and started digging around in the pack.

“I’ll be right out here if you need me for anything,” he added, clearly hoping she might stop and talk to him.

“Just go away,” Willa hissed, feeling around until she found the pouch at the bottom of the pack.

“What do you mean? Why would I leave you here unprotected? I’m not going anywhere, Willa, and that’s final.”

“You’re not going to protect me,” Willa retorted. “All you’re going to do is make a bigger mess of things.”

With that, she stormed back toward the saloon, ignoring whatever tug she felt to apologize for the hardness of her words. Willa was tired of Theo’s arrogance and his rudeness, tired of his inability to trust her or have any faith in her at all.

She was done putting forth so much effort when it was all a waste. No matter what she did, Theo never seemed to appreciate her.

He was in this for himself, just like she had been until meeting him. And in that moment, Willa didn’t know what angered her more.

Was it Theo? Or was it how vulnerable Theo made her feel?

Yes, Theo was clearly hurt by her coldness, but she was hurt by him in so many ways, not least of all the fact that she had opened up to him. It was a mistake, and she wasn’t going to risk getting distracted all over again.

If she were to let that happen, she would miss out on information. Here she was, about to finally get what she needed most, and that wasn’t something she could lose just because Theo was a little bit sad. He was a grown man and could handle himself, as far as Willa was concerned.

Deciding not to get down about his behavior, Willa put on a smile and waltzed back into the saloon. She was ready to chat with the girls and find out exactly where Wild Buck had gone.

And now that she was bringing them something special, Willa was certain they would tell her everything.

She was finally going to find her bounty.

## 24

Willa walked up to the girls with bright eyes and a false sense of youthfulness. They were clearly waiting in anticipation after she'd told them she had something special, but there was also a hint of trepidation in their demeanor.

"Ladies, I can see that you all like your rouge, but I have a few other things that you might find extra special," she announced.

Before she even revealed the beauty products, the girls looked delighted, realizing that it must be something like this.

She opened the little pouch and unrolled it, revealing two shades of fine-quality lipstick, a couple small jars of kohl, and other pigments that the girls might use for their eyes and cheeks.

It had cost Willa a pretty penny, but she trusted that it was going to pay off even now, just learning what these girls knew.

"Wait!" Marianne insisted, causing the other girls to freeze.

Willa paused as Marianne looked around and the other girls huddled up close in a flash.

"I don't want anyone else seeing them and thinking they can get their grubby mitts on them. You know, like some fella whose wife is mad at him so he wants to bring her home a gift?

"We shouldn't have these out down here. Come on, you should join us

upstairs," she said.

Willa feigned humility, putting a hand to her heart as though she were deeply moved. She even batted her lashes in a show of innocence, thankful that these women had fallen for her ploy.

She was proud that she had remembered even having these items, despite the fact that she'd never used them.

"Yes, you have to come," May said.

"All right, if you ladies insist. I'm happy to join you," she relented.

Willa followed the girls upstairs, hopeful this would be the moment she needed to bond with them and get them to open up to her. She could talk about how worried she was for Dove and they would let little pieces of information fall.

Once they were in Marianne's room, a few circled around the mirror while a couple other girls went and got small looking glasses from their rooms that they could bring in so everyone was able to indulge.

"Where did you get all of this? And why aren't you using it? This is the finest bunch of cosmetics I have ever seen, nothing at all like what we use," Betty said.

"I got it in the city. Sadly, I have no use for it," Willa replied, sadly.

"Why not? Why would you spend money on something this nice and then never use it? It must have cost you an awful lot," Betty said.

"I suppose it did, but I thought I would have the chance to wear it more. You see, I had dreams and I thought I'd be some fine lady.

"In the end, I'm just working on a ranch, helping out as best I can. There's no need for beauty products there," she lied.

"You? A rancher? I'm surprised. Your dress is awfully nice, as well.

Then again, I suppose it's not what you wear on the ranch," May said.

"No, it isn't. This is my nicest dress, but at least I have a reason to wear it now and then. The cosmetics, however, I never do," she said.

"But why are you letting us try it?" Marianne asked, just before she pursed her lips and slowly drew the lipstick over them, creating a striking sheen of color that looked significantly better than what she had before.

"No one else is going to use it, so you all might as well enjoy it. You have been so nice to me today. I haven't had a real chance to chat with other ladies in a long time and you've welcomed me and just spent time with me," she said.

"There aren't a whole lot of decent ladies who speak to us. It's as if they're just threatened by us, thinking we're bound to steal away their husbands or something," Marianne noted.

"Well, that's just silly. What woman would be threatened by such nice ladies as you?" Willa asked, leaning against a dresser.

"Oh, you would be surprised. There are a whole lot of them who think we are jezebels," May added.

"Such a shame," Willa said, looking at some of the papers on the desk.

It wasn't long before she spotted exactly what she had been hoping for. Immediately, her heart began to race and she was delighted by what she saw.

"Well, I suppose that's what we get for living in sin like this," Betty said, handing the lipstick to one of the girls whose name Willa didn't know yet.

She needed to get the girls talking. They were distracted by the beauty products, but that wasn't going to hold their attention forever. She had to slow them down while they used them.

Staring into their mirrors and gazing at their reflections as they spoke was a good way of ensuring that no one was watching Willa.

“So, what would you all do if you weren’t in this line of work?” she asked, prompting a new, excited energy from most of the girls.

They each launched into descriptions of what they would like to do. For most of them, it was a dream of living with a husband and children, keeping a garden and playing with the little ones.

Two of the women wanted to marry ranchers so they could spend time with animals, while a couple of the others wanted to move to the big city and become seamstresses or chorus girls or marry wealthy bankers.

But as they spoke and Willa gave small sounds of attention, her eyes were on the letter that sat atop the dresser—a letter written just a day before by Dove.

*Hi ladies,*

*I miss you all so much. I am hoping to come back soon, but you all know how difficult it is for Buck right now.*

*He is having to find a new hideout and we’re heading just north of Miltonville for a few days, hoping for the cabin by Lake Tuscell. Buck has no choice but to lay low for a while and we are hoping the people coming after him do not manage to track us down this time.*

*Think of us while we are gone. You all know how grateful I am that you are keeping things a secret for Buck.*

*He would be in such terrible trouble if he was ever caught and he really is a decent man, despite the things he has done. If anyone comes around looking for him, please, do not say a word.*

*This is the last place we have where we can go and if he is found out, I really am afraid that it will be the end for him. There is nowhere left he*

*can hide.*

*Anyway, I hope to join you all again soon enough, once he has had a few days to plan. See you all soon and tell my customers I will be back before they know it.*

*Peacefully yours,*

*Dove*

Willa clenched her jaw to contain the excitement she was feeling. She could hardly believe her luck!

Although she had come up here in hopes that she might be able to get the girls talking, she had discovered something far greater.

This would obviously be the key to finding Buck. Victory was so close, she couldn't lose it again.

"That's wonderful, May. I'm sure you would make a fine wife and mother," Willa said, responding to the girl's dream of marrying for love and having eight children.

With a quick scan around the room to ensure all the women were still caught up in their cosmetics, Willa quickly slipped the letter from the dresser and silently folded it behind her back before tucking it into her skirt.

She had done it so subtly that not a single woman turned her head or noticed the movement.

Willa couldn't wait to show Theo. This was perfect, and she was confident that she had finally managed to get exactly what they had been hoping for.

With the details of where Wild Buck and Dove were at, they could sneak in and pounce before the two had a chance to escape.

“Well, you all have such marvelous dreams,” she said, knowing that it was better she leave sooner rather than later.

If any of the girls came over and found the letter missing, Willa would be in trouble and she couldn’t have that. Even the smallest risk of being caught was more than she could handle right now.

As if by sheer design, there was a sudden burst of noise, a commotion from down in the saloon. Willa’s eyes went wide, wondering what all the shouting and crashing was about.

Had Theo gotten himself into trouble?

“What is all that?” she asked.

The girls looked up for a moment, but then shrugged and went back to work on their faces.

“Probably just some fellas fighting. They do it all the time,” Marianne said.

“But what if it’s not? What if there are bandits?” she asked, feeling a panic from years ago rising up within her.

Immediately, Willa enacted her long-held skill of suppressing her fear and maintaining a façade of calm. She needed to maintain her dignity and not reveal to these women just how frightened she was.

“It’s all right, darlin’, no one is going to harm us,” Betty said, comfortingly.

Still, Willa was anxious from the sounds and even more anxious to leave before she was caught with the letter. She figured there was no better chance to get away than this one.

With that, she looked around at the girls and gave a nervous chuckle.

“I’m sure you’re right, but a woman can’t be too careful. I’m just going

to go and check it out to make sure there's nothing more going on than that," she said.

"You're leaving us?" May asked.

"I just want to check it out. Besides, I'm starting to get a bit hungry and might need to eat and then get some rest. But I'll see you all again soon.

"Have a nice night, ladies!" she called as she slipped out of the room and started to creep down the hall to the stairwell.

The commotion was getting louder and rowdier by the moment and Willa could tell it wasn't something she wanted to get in the middle of.

But she had what she needed most. The letter was going to make all the difference, and she could show Theo in the hopes that he would be a mix of proud and jealous of her ability to do this right.

Yes, at last, she could go and face Theo with the knowledge that she had proven her worth. What he would do with that information would be completely up to him.

## 25

The girls were right. All the commotion and chaos in the saloon was just the result of a fight between drunken men who were busy making a mess of the building.

Willa wasn't sure she would even be able to pass through them without getting a punch thrown in her direction and, suddenly, she was a little bit less smug than before.

After all, how could she go and find Wild Buck if she wasn't even able to escape this building?

"Careful!" Betty said, coming up behind her.

"Betty?"

"I didn't want you having to come down here on your own. These fellas cause a right ruckus when they get started and it never ends well for them.

"You have no idea how much chaos a man can be responsible for creating," Betty warned.

Willa sighed and shook her head. "Unfortunately, I know very well what kind of damage they can do," she replied.

"I wanted to make sure you weren't injured," Betty said, trying to be loud enough for Willa to hear her over the bedlam that was taking place in the room.

Just when Willa thought she was at least safe, a man was punched and stumbled back against the stairs, crashing into the wooden banister.

Willa released a yelp of surprise as she jumped away, but she missed her step and stumbled down the last few stairs and into the fray. Before she knew it, she was surrounded by violence, dodging the barrage of men who were violently fighting to prove their worth.

“Betty!” she called out, hoping to ensure the other woman was all right, but when she looked up, she saw her running back up the stairs for her own safety.

Relieved that Betty had made it up, Willa then turned her attention to her own situation, realizing she needed to find a way out of this mess. Just in time, she ducked to avoid one fella who was sent flying beside her, the smell of whiskey sailing past her in kind.

Shattered glass covered the floor, causing a crunch under Willa’s shoe, but she barely heard it over the shouting and raging. For a moment, she was frightened that she might get pushed to the glass-covered ground, but she took a deep breath and tried to figure out a path to the outside.

There was no chance of escape.

Before she had a chance to do anything more, shots rang out in the saloon. Willa’s heart started to race. She was afraid of getting hit by a stray bullet before she had a chance to get out of there.

Soon enough, she realized her only choice was to get back to the stairs and climb out through a window. With that goal in mind, Willa charged back from where she had come, pushing one hefty man out of the way, and didn’t stop until she had made it all the way up the stairs.

She bolted down the hall to where the girls were still sitting, but now they seemed upset rather than their previous demeanor.

“What’s going on down there? Betty said she’s never seen it so bad,” Marianne said.

“Oh, I thought you were dead for sure!” Betty exclaimed, throwing her arms around Willa.

“I don’t know what it’s normally like, but I’ve never seen a brawl like this, either. Come on, we need to get out the window before the fight comes up here,” Willa said in earnest.

The girls followed her to the window and Willa opened it, pushing hard in a spot where it stuck in place. One by one, she helped the girls out the window, lowering them to the ground.

Marianne went first, being the tallest, and helped from the ground until all the girls were out except Willa.

She stuck her feet out the window and then hopped down, landing hard on the soles of her feet and feeling a slight twinge in her left knee.

But it wouldn’t give her too much trouble, so she immediately turned, knowing she would have to rush to the front of the saloon where Theo swore he would be waiting.

“Stay here, ladies. Or go somewhere you will be safe.

“You can’t go back in there until all of this is over. I wouldn’t be surprised if they do enough damage to bring the whole building down,” Willa said.

“Come on, girls, let’s head to Lucy’s place. She’ll take good care of us,” Marianne said.

“What about you?” Betty asked.

“I’m going to my room at the boarding house. If there was enough room, I would invite you all, but there’s only a small bed and a desk.

“It’s not big enough for two people, let alone all of us,” she replied, slightly exaggerating the smallness of the room.

Although she would have loved to ensure the girls were protected, Willa couldn’t risk that they might want to come with her. She had to get moving, to find Theo and start out for where Buck was.

While she hoped she would see the girls again, it couldn’t be her priority or even a distraction right now. She had to close off her heart to them, just as she had closed off her heart to so many.

“It’s all right. Just come tomorrow and see if things are all right and if we are able to go back home. We’ll see you soon enough,” Marianne said, clearly eager to leave.

Willa nodded, though she knew that she would not return the next day. Once the girls had gone, she hurriedly bolted around the other side of the saloon and made her way out to the front.

But Theo was nowhere to be seen.

At first, she was discouraged, but then Willa was just angry. Yes, she had been harsh, she had told him to leave even.

But still, hadn’t he made her a promise? Hadn’t he said that he would be there no matter what?

Willa was hurt that, once again, Theo had abandoned her. He wasn’t willing to give her much of a chance and he had given up all because she was hurt.

She couldn’t help being angry even though she knew it was partially her own fault. It still didn’t seem fair.

He had probably gone back to the inn, just as she had told him to. Willa had spent a good amount of time with the girls and it made sense that he would get bored and decide to head back in order to rest or prepare for whatever would come next since Willa hadn’t told him

anything yet.

She knew it was the most likely reason he had decided to leave her, but she found she was still bothered that he would just abandon her this way.

Hadn't Theo stopped to consider that Willa might be depending on him?

It had been her mistake before and now, it was her mistake again. Why did she keep thinking she could trust Theo?

Why did she keep putting her faith in a man who obviously had no intention of looking out for her or taking care of her?

If he was going to keep proving that he wasn't trustworthy, she had to stop thinking he might change.

Willa pulled the letter out from her skirt and read through it again. She had all the details she needed and it wouldn't be hard to find Dove and Wild Buck.

If Theo didn't trust her and if she couldn't depend on him either, there was only one thing she could reasonably do.

With that, Willa mounted her horse and started riding toward the town mentioned in the letter. If she rode all night, she would be there by morning without Theo ever knowing.

He would wake up to find that she was gone—and by then, it would be too late for him to come after her.

## 26

Theo ducked behind a chair as another bottle was thrown. He had managed to avoid getting shot so far, but it was only a matter of time before someone came after him as well.

Everyone had turned against one another, jumping into the fray.

He peeked over the chair in the corner, hoping for a glimpse of Willa, but he still couldn't see her. In fact, he couldn't see any of the girls.

He hoped they weren't there anymore, that they had gone up the stairs or found somewhere to hide.

After waiting outside for an eternity, Theo had heard the shots ring out and had rushed inside to rescue Willa. Before he knew it, he was trapped behind the men doing the shooting, and when others began shooting back, he knew he was in serious danger.

Rather than joining in the ruckus, Theo figured he had no choice but to wait it out and keep hoping Willa was safe somewhere else.

At last, there was a small clearing between two different groups in the middle of fighting. Theo took a deep breath, knowing that this was his one and only chance—and that it could easily end with him getting killed.

He launched from his crouched position and tore through the center of the saloon, charging up the stairs and leaving the echoes of gunshots behind him.

As soon as Theo reached the upper floor, he began scouring for anyone he might be able to see. Searching each room, he wondered where Willa had gone if she wasn't up here.

But once he realized the entire floor was empty, Theo knew she had left. There was no way she was hiding out here. If Willa hadn't charged into the battle, she must have gone somewhere else.

Theo took a deep breath and stood in the doorway of one of the rooms. It was a mess, with all kinds of beauty products sprawled over the bed.

The window was also open, letting in the cool evening air. None of the other windows were open. Just this one.

Little by little, Theo put the pieces together. The girls must have gone out through the window.

Since Willa had been with them to ask questions, he could only assume that she had gone out the window as well, chasing after the girls and trying to get what she needed.

At least, he hoped that was what had happened.

As much as Theo knew Willa could take care of herself and he wanted to believe she was probably out there with the other girls, he still couldn't shake the awful worry that something might have happened to her.

What if she really was still downstairs? What if she'd been hurt? It was possible that she'd found a man to question instead of the girls.

She knew how to interrogate people without them realizing just what she was doing, and he would understand if she'd decided to try and question a fella instead. But what if she was hurt?

Theo's heart began to pound as he considered the possibility. He decided to glance down into the saloon one last time. Maybe from the

top of the stairs he would see her if she was there.

He hurried down the hall and crept down just far enough that he could peek into the room and see what was happening. There was a standoff near the doors, but the center of the room was still a brawl and two men looked like they were about to cause another shootout near the bar.

But there was no Willa.

Convinced that she hadn't been hurt in the saloon, Theo decided to go out the window of the girls' room. As soon as his feet hit the ground, Theo raced for the boarding house.

Maybe she had returned there. It was possible that Willa had gone there in search of him and had assumed he'd left when she told him to. And where else would she go?

Theo burst through the door of the inn and raced up the stairs to the room he shared with Willa. He didn't even bother trying the key and when the door opened without it, his heart instantly warmed.

There, sitting quietly on the bed, was Willa.

"Oh, thank heavens," Theo said, rushing over to her.

Without a second thought, he embraced her, holding her close in his arms as if it were the most natural thing in all the world, as if she belonged there more than anywhere else.

"You're all right. Oh, thank heavens, you're all right! I was so worried about you. But you're okay.

"You made it through the shootout and the brawls. I was terrified," he said tenderly, his lips not far from her ear.

Willa didn't respond. She wasn't stiff, necessarily, but she didn't melt into him the way he did to her. He couldn't explain what he felt from

her. It wasn't resistance, but it wasn't quite acceptance, either.

And yet, he didn't care. All he cared about was the fact that she was safe and she was here.

"I really thought you might have been hurt, Willa. I'm so thankful you survived," he said, unable to stop the sentiments as they poured from his mouth.

Theo was shocked by his own emotions. He had been frightfully stressed, worrying about her in the midst of everything that had happened, but now, she was perfectly fine.

He couldn't explain his relief or how it made him feel. He had never felt like this before, at least not in many years.

Not since things were happy and he had his family to look out for him. Not since that time when he was a boy and he was lost, but his mother found him and he hugged her in his relief.

That was the closest thing he could compare this to, the closest anything had ever come to this embrace.

But Theo knew he would have to pull away eventually. When he did, slowly letting go of Willa, he was surprised to see she had tears in her eyes, as well.

"Willa? Are you all right? Did you get hurt? Am I going on about you being fine when you're actually not?" he asked.

She tried to smile, but he sensed there was something holding her back. Although he couldn't tell what it might be, Willa was obviously trying to mask her emotions and failing to do so.

"I'm all right. No one harmed me. Everything is just fine," she said.

"Then what is it? Why do you look so sad?"

Willa held out a letter to him. Theo was confused, but he took it in his hand. Before he could read it, she explained.

“I was going to leave without you,” she said, the words full of hurt and shame.

Theo waited, not liking the sound of that at all and wondering where she was going with this. If she was planning to leave him behind, why hadn’t she? What was she staying around for?

And did she regret that she stayed? Did she wish she’d gone ahead without him after all?

“Oh…” he said, quietly.

“Read the letter, Theo. It’s everything we need. I found it in Marianne's bedroom. Dove wrote it to the girls there and it tells us exactly where she and Wild Buck are going to be,” she said.

His interest was piqued and Theo tried to ignore the hurt he felt. He figured this was the best thing to do, focusing on this letter and all the important information it held.

This was exactly what they’d hoped for, and if he was able to get this now, if they were able to get going soon and find Buck, maybe it would all have been worth it.

But what did that mean? Would he and Willa say goodbye soon after? Why did that bother him so much? Hadn’t he been annoyed by her once upon a time? When, exactly, did all of that change?

“You were going to leave…” he said, a statement rather than a question. Theo realized Willa had been so determined to do this that she was perfectly willing to go alone.

Not only willing, she was capable. There was no reason she would want to come back for Theo when they’d had a terrible fight earlier and he had proven he wasn’t willing to truly work with her.

Yes, of course she was going to leave.

“I was,” she replied. “I wanted to do it myself. But I came back and that’s important for you to know.”

“Why? Why did you come back? If you really wanted to do it all on your own, there was no reason for you to come back and give me the information,” he said, pushing against the hurt and frustration that he felt, knowing she wanted to leave him behind.

“I came back for a reason, Theo. I came back…” Willa said, trailing off.

At last, she looked up at him, meeting his gaze with depth and feeling in her own.

“I came back because I want to finish this with you.”

## 27

After all of the drama of the day, Willa was relieved that she and Theo had come to a decision.

They would rest that night and leave in the morning, making their way toward the hideout where Dove and Wild Buck were staying.

But the two of them had also decided to put everything behind them and be at peace with one another at last. They were done fighting, done trying to outdo each other.

It was time that they live in harmony and focus on the mutual goal of finding Wild Buck and bringing him to justice.

She crawled into the bed next to Theo, who was already lying back with his eyes closed. He was silent, but she couldn't tell if he was asleep.

His breathing was steady, but not necessarily the steadiness of sleep.

She took in the sight of him for a long moment. There was only a sliver of moonlight by which she could see, but it came in the window just enough to cast a glow upon Theo's face.

She saw his long lashes, his perfectly carved nose, his sturdy chin. He was incredibly handsome and she wished she had the courage to tell him that.

But it would be a mistake. He would be shocked by such a confession

from Willa.

The bed seemed smaller than she was accustomed to and figured it was just because she had a newfound sense of closeness to Theo. Still, Willa couldn't quite get comfortable and it was already irritating.

She didn't want to bother Theo or wake him if he was, indeed, already asleep, but she turned over twice, facing away from him because that was more acceptable, then facing him because she was more comfortable on her right side.

Willa squeezed her eyes closed, trying to let go of all her anxieties, but her brain wouldn't stop. She couldn't get all of her thoughts to quiet long enough to get any rest.

At last, Theo stretched his arm over and behind her head and drew her close so she was resting on his chest. For a moment, Willa couldn't breathe.

She was shocked, not having expected this at all. But she was also exhausted and had no intention of resisting this comfort.

With all the tension and emotions from the day, Willa was overwhelmed, and she knew Theo was, as well. Before long, he finally spoke up.

"I can't sleep either," he said quietly into the dark.

"I'm sorry. Am I keeping you up with my tossing and turning?" she asked.

"No, it isn't you. It's everything we went through today and trying to figure out what to do next. We have so much going on, I don't know how I'm supposed to rest.

"I was worried about you today, Willa. I really was. I know you're tough and you can handle yourself, but I still worry about you," he confessed.

“I know,” she said in a hushed tone.

“So much has happened and I just don’t think I can deal with all of the chaos over and over again. Don’t you know how much I just want to see you safe and out of harm’s way?

“And here we are, planning to go into the pit of danger again tomorrow. It seems like all of this has been so drawn out that every time we think it’s almost going to be finished, we just end up in even more danger,” Theo said.

“Maybe this time it will be different. I’m confident that we’ve found him. There’s no reason to think this letter is inaccurate.

“I doubt Wild Buck is intelligent enough to have Dove send a fake letter just in case someone comes looking for him and starts questioning the ladies,” Willa said with a laugh.

“He wouldn’t think to go to all that trouble. We will be fine, Theo. We are going to find him tomorrow and after that…”

There was the real question. What was going to come after that? Were they going to stay together? Would they say goodbye? It didn’t matter. Not right now, anyway. They didn’t need to discuss it.

“After that, we can just be happy with a job well done,” Willa said, finishing her thought with something nicely impersonal.

Theo looked up at her, his amber eyes sparkling in the moonlight just before a cloud traveled over the vast, white orb. They were cast in darkness once more.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with you if you keep getting into trouble. I haven’t known you long and it’s already hard to think about something happening to you,” Theo said.

Willa realized she had been so busy keeping her secrets from Theo, she’d never allowed herself to trust him with something that would

explain so much of it. She had promised herself she wouldn't be this vulnerable again, but what if that had been her problem?

What if that was the reason she and Theo hadn't seen things eye to eye? What if all she needed was to tell him where she was coming from and he would understand the sort of woman she really was?

"Theo, there are things I haven't told you yet," she began.

His body was still. Willa sensed he was anxious about whatever she might say, that he might not even be sure he wanted to know. But she made a decision. It was time to tell him.

Her heart began to race as it always did when she thought about that night. It had been years since Willa had told anyone about what happened.

She was probably no more than twelve or thirteen when she had recounted the tale to a minister who wanted to help her find a home or stay in the orphanage. But Willa had run off instead.

She'd wanted to take care of herself. She'd wanted to prove that she could.

"There's a reason I do this work, you know, just as I'm sure there is a reason you started doing it. I know it isn't easy to talk about these things and that most bounty hunters just want to be seen for how tough we are, how strong we can be.

"But at the end of the day, we all do this for a reason. And I think you need to know mine," Willa said.

"I'm listening," Theo replied, sweetly.

"When I was a young girl, my family was attacked," she said, not wanting to relive the memory but knowing she had little choice.

"Attacked?"

“Yes. We lived above the general store my father owned. And one night, some bandits broke in. They wanted to steal a few things for themselves.

“To this day, I don’t know what was so important that they couldn’t just wait and buy it the next day,” she said, voicing the question that had haunted her even though it seemed so insignificant compared to what had happened.

“Anyway, I heard the noises and went down. They had my parents tied up. I went after the men with the rifle, but I was a child. The men left, laughing at me as they did so.

“But there was one more. He was upstairs with my sisters. He’d been sent to tie them up and make sure they didn’t come down,” she said, her breathing ragged from the ache in her throat as she tried not to cry.

“Willa, I’m so sorry. Are you sure you want to tell me what happened?” Theo asked politely, giving her the chance to stop since she was clearly struggling.

Willa appreciated his offer, but she couldn’t take it.

“Yes,” she replied. “You should know.”

She took a moment to gather herself and return to her stoicism, bracing herself for the tidal wave of sadness that was bound to wash over her as she shared the rest.

“The man who was upstairs came down while I was outside of the house. He knocked over a candle by the door. It was too late for me to do anything.

“I tried to get back inside, but the curtain by the door caught fire and there was no way for me to get back inside. I was the only one not tied up, I was the only one…”

She caught her breath and trailed off.

“I was the only one to survive.”

“Willa…” he said with a gasp.

“I didn’t ever want to be helpless again after that. I wanted to prove myself, to make sure everyone knew I was strong. And I wanted to ensure I brought down anyone who acted like the monsters who killed my family,” she said, her voice cracking at the final word.

Theo’s arms tightened around her, holding her close. Tears streamed down her cheeks and pooled in the fabric of Theo’s shirt, but she managed to keep her weeping at bay.

She didn’t allow herself to cry much, if ever. Willa relied on her bitterness to prevent her tears.

“Thank you, Willa,” Theo said.

“For what?”

“For telling me that. For being willing to share something so painful. And you’re far from helpless, you should know that by now.

“You’re one of the most amazing fighters I have ever seen,” Theo told her.

Willa’s heart surged, but she didn’t want to believe him, to depend on those words. Theo was a kind man, but that didn’t make him right.

She had plenty of weaknesses and by telling him about what had happened, she only proved that he was among them.

She’d managed to get through her story, to share something about her past and how she came to be this way. But more had happened in her life that encouraged her along.

That had merely been a catalyst. She'd then found she was good at putting the pieces together, at deducing what might happen next or where someone might be.

Willa had a skill in how she interacted with others, in gaining their confidence or in beating them down until they told her everything she wanted to know. She understood how people worked and that was a necessary skill in what she did now.

But she'd already told Theo the most important part. All the rest would come out in time. He seemed to understand why she was so determined. Mercifully, he accepted her reasoning.

"Anyway, that's my story. That's the reason I do what I do," she said.

For a moment, Theo was quiet. But it didn't take him long. She sensed that he was determined to be as bold as she had been and to share his story, as well.

"I suppose that since you've told me your story, it's probably my turn to tell you a little bit about mine," he said.

"You don't have to," Willa replied. The last thing she wanted was for him to feel backed into a corner or forced to share it.

"Honestly, I just wanted you to know about me, but I wouldn't want you to feel like you have to say anything back."

"It's all right, Willa. I think it's only fair and you and I both know—like you said—that people do this for a reason."

Willa nodded, unsure if Theo could see it in the dark, or if he felt her movement. But he started to speak and she stayed quiet in anticipation of learning a little something more about this man who had come along and stolen her heart.

"I've caught more than a handful of men, but there has always been one in particular I've been looking for," Theo said.

Willa waited for more of his story. She knew nothing about him, not really—only his life in the past few days since they had come together. Everything before that was unknown.

“Buck took my family away from me, too,” he said at last.

“What?” Willa asked.

“He’s the reason they’re gone,” he confirmed.

Willa wanted to ask how Wild Buck had done that, what had happened for him to take away Theo’s family, but she didn’t want to push.

She understood how awful the details could be and she already knew Wild Buck had murdered so many people. To learn he had murdered Theo’s family as well was just awful.

“I’m so sorry, Theo,” she said.

“It’s why I have to go after him,” he said.

Willa felt such a strong connection to Theo and it was only strengthened now. She knew they had a lot in common, but it had never before been so strong as this.

Suddenly, she felt as if they were bound together. “I’ve never shared this much with anyone,” she confessed.

“Neither have I,” Theo replied, still holding her close.

“I feel like I’m speaking with my real husband rather than some man I’ve spent the past few days arguing with,” she said, somewhat teasingly.

“Oh, yeah? A husband?” he asked with a laugh.

“I’m sure you would make a fine husband,” Willa said, joking with

him in reply. But deep down, she really felt that it was true.

No matter how tough they had to be, no matter how much they had to pretend they didn't consider these things, she really did think Theo would make a good husband.

And when his breathing steadily drifted to that of sleep, she hoped this wouldn't be the last time he would hold her. In fact, maybe it was possible that this was just the beginning.

## 28

Theo slowly opened his eyes and let out a breath, realizing that his left arm had fallen asleep. He flexed his fingers, then noticed the weight on his chest and the striking hair splayed out over him.

Willa was in his arms.

She looked so peaceful in her sleep, like an angel or something equally ethereal. Something about the moment, about holding her there and watching her as she rested, made Theo think about the future.

He could get used to seeing this every morning. He wanted it more than he could admit.

She was a surprise in every way and after hearing her story from the night before, everything made more sense about her. She really was everything he had seen from the start, but the vulnerability underneath her strength was even more beautiful.

Her tenderness and depth took his breath away and he didn't know how to tell her how much she had come to mean to him in such a short time.

Was it necessary? Did he have to say anything? Wouldn't that only ruin it?

Theo's heart skipped a beat as he gently but firmly shifted Willa so she would wake up without being jarred from her sleep. Her eyes blinked open and she looked at him first with surprise, and then with

contentment.

It was a striking change from one to the other and Theo was sure Willa had felt the same thing he had.

“Did I sleep too late?” she asked, smiling dreamily up at him.

“The sun is barely up. I only woke a short time ago,” he said.

“Thank goodness, I would have felt awful if I had slept too late and caused us a delay. After all, we stayed up quite late last night and I was afraid I wouldn’t manage to wake this morning,” Willa confessed.

“Don’t worry. Everything is just fine. You and I still have time to eat a quick bite of breakfast and then get out on the road,” he said.

With that, Theo and Willa got up and started getting ready. She put on her nice dress again and Theo wore his finest clothes, as well.

They put everything in their packs and he threw them over his shoulder. “I’m going to head down.

“I’ll tell the innkeeper to have breakfast ready for us as soon as possible and then I’ll go and have the horses saddled up and these tied on. I’ll see you in about ten minutes,” he said.

Willa smiled and for a moment, Theo didn’t think he could leave her there. Nevertheless, he tore himself away and took the things down, telling the innkeeper they needed to eat and then going to the stables to have the horses prepared.

By the time he met Willa for their breakfast, he was feeling a new kind of pressure in his heart.

How was it that he and Willa were on their way to go after Buck? What was going to happen? They were so close and, this time, they were sure of his whereabouts.

It wasn't just a question or a guess or a lead. It was actual proof, written on a piece of paper and ready to be unleashed into reality, where they would find Buck and take him down.

He needed more time. All of this was happening too fast and he wasn't ready. He wasn't prepared for the showdown with Buck or for his time with Willa to end.

And he wasn't prepared for the inevitable, the thing that left him aching and fearful of losing Willa's trust.

They ate quietly and Theo was beginning to wonder if Willa was feeling the same things he was. Was she anxious? Was she nervous?

Did she have the same sense of foreboding, and was she also worried about what might happen once all of this was over?

Soon enough, they were on their way. The horses were saddled, their room had been paid for, and Theo and Willa mounted up to head toward the lake mentioned in the letter.

"It's not too far from here," Willa said. "No more than half a day's ride."

"Good," Theo said, nervously. "That's great."

He wasn't sure what more to say. The fact was, they were finally getting close to finding Buck and he still hadn't told Willa the whole truth.

He still hadn't shared what they needed to do or why he was so determined not to harm Buck, but would rather take him in to the sheriff.

The anticipation was palpable, but how could he tell her? Willa would be furious with him for keeping this secret, but she would also be upset and think she couldn't trust Theo simply because of what had happened in his past.

She was going to be mad no matter what. A small part of Theo wanted to believe he could just be calm and patient and convince Willa to do things his way. Then, she would never have to know.

But he knew better. There was no chance that it would all go that smoothly.

Willa was going to find out the truth and it was only a matter of whether Theo was willing to tell her himself or let her find out after they'd brought Buck down.

If she discovered it on her own, she would be even more furious with Theo and she would never forgive him.

It would ruin every dream he was starting to have about their future together.

Theo looked over at Willa and took in her profile as she looked onward. They'd been riding at a gallop for most of the morning, but were taking some time to slow down and give the horses a chance to rest.

There wasn't much of a chance that they were going to miss Buck, as long as Buck and Dove hadn't left the cabin a day or so before.

Right now, the greatest risk was that they might stumble upon the two of them in the road, and that would cause more problems for Theo than anything else.

He was still trying to figure out a plan to make sure that they didn't end this thing with Willa hating him. He couldn't bear that.

After two hours of riding, they stopped for a break and took another look at the map.

"See? It's just beyond the hill and going down into the valley where the lake is. The letter mentions a cabin. It's a small lake, so it isn't going to be hard to spot the place.

“I don’t think there are a whole lot of trees in that area. I bet it will be an easy find. They won’t expect us to come looking there,” Willa said.

“No, they sure won’t,” Theo echoed.

“So, what do you think? We need a proper plan,” Willa said.

“You don’t want to just bust in there and drag him to the sheriff?” Theo asked.

“Well, I don’t want Dove getting hurt. I met so many of her friends and they are nice girls. They care about each other and they care about Dove.

“They would be so sad if anything happened to her, and I don’t want that for her. I was thinking we could try and lead her away somehow,” Willa said.

This was perfect. If Willa was distracted with Dove, he would have a better chance of convincing Buck to come in with him—and getting Buck to stay quiet about what Theo didn’t want Willa to find out.

If it came to that, this was a better option than any other.

“That’s not a bad plan,” he said. “I think you’re onto something. If you worry about Dove, I can get Buck taken care of.”

“Slow down there for a moment,” she said, putting up a hand in warning. “You know as well as I do that we are equal partners in this.

“Just because I’m letting you get Buck doesn’t mean I won’t be there, ready to take him down right alongside you. It just makes a whole lot more sense if I, as a woman, go after Dove instead of you.”

“I know, Willa. Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything to betray you,” Theo said, ignoring the ache in his chest at the words. He hoped it wasn’t a lie, but a part of him knew it might be.

Any promise he made to her was dependent upon a number of variables, and Buck might be able to bypass all of them.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it. I just need to get Dove out of there so he doesn’t use her to his advantage.

“You know what a man like that might do, trying to trade her for his own safety or using her to block bullets,” she said, grimacing with disgust.

“But how are you going to lead her away? Won’t Buck get suspicious if you come along, showing up out of nowhere?” Theo asked, worried that this could be a flawed plan, after all.

But surely there was something they could come up with. They had just been in town and Willa had spent time with the girls. She had to know something.

Willa thought long and hard for a moment. Theo was glad this was her idea. She wouldn’t be suspicious if he encouraged her to be far away from the house while he wrangled Buck.

Besides, this way, Buck wouldn’t have the girl to use as a bargaining chip and try to escape with the threat of hurting her if they didn’t let him go.

“That’s just it,” Willa said, excitedly. “They aren’t expecting us to show up. They’ll be surprised when I come to the door in this dress. I can tell them there was an incident at the saloon.

“I’ll tell them about the brawl. I can say that Dove is needed, that some of the girls were injured and they were begging me to come and get her so she could be with them in this terrible time.”

It was a good plan. One that would probably convince Buck better than any other.

He had seen Willa before, but not like this. There was no chance of

him recognizing her.

After all, she'd had her hat on the last time, shadowing her face, along with those grubby clothes that were covered in dust. Now, she looked like an awfully fine lady.

She had her hair tucked neatly under her hat and the dress was an expensive material. She didn't look like a bounty hunter, just a decent woman from the city.

"That's a great idea, Willa. They will certainly believe you. What are you going to do after that? How will you convince Dove to come with you?"

"I'll just tell her that the girls asked me to bring her back with me. I'll say that I didn't know what else to do but that my heart was so broken for them that I had to do what they asked.

"There's no way Dove will be able to resist it. She's going to be upset for her friends and she will certainly come back with me," Willa said, clearly determined that she knew what she was doing.

Theo took a deep breath and released it quickly. It was the best option and he knew he had little choice but to go along with it.

"All right, Willa. I think you're onto something. Remember that we need to be cautious, but I think it will work.

"Just make sure you don't sound too familiar with her or with Buck. Only with the girls at the saloon," he said.

"Don't worry. I can do this," she said.

They crested the hill and looked down into the valley. There was, indeed, a small lake, and the trees were sparse. The cottage was small, but visible from a distance.

It was hiding in plain sight in the perfect secluded spot for a man like

Buck. No one would have expected a criminal like him to be out here, hidden away in a place so serene and beautiful.

He'd been clever, and that only made Theo that much more furious. After everything he had been through, he wanted Buck to pay for his mistakes, and this was not a punishment in the slightest.

This was a retreat. This was so far from the punishment Buck deserved, and that just didn't seem right when Theo had been the one to suffer the consequences of the outlaw's actions for all these years.

"That must be it," Willa said, her breathing unsteady from the anticipation.

"I don't see another place it could be. I think we finally found what we've been searching for all this time, Willa. We've found Buck's hideout and this is the moment we've been waiting for," he said.

"Sure is," she replied with a grin.

This was his last chance. They were only a half-mile from the cottage.

He needed to tell Willa everything, to lay it all out and express his deepest apologies. There would never be another chance like this one.

He took a deep breath and readied himself to tell her everything.

"Wi—"

Before he could get out her name, Willa reached out and took Theo's hand. She smiled at him as she gave his hand a squeeze.

"Thank you for trusting me, Theo. Finally. There's no one I'd rather be doing this with, no one better to catch Wild Buck with me," she said.

Theo was speechless, but even more so when Willa leaned forward from her horse and gave Theo a peck on the cheek.

His mind went blank as Willa turned and raced off toward the cottage, moving closer and closer to the end.

## 29

Willa breathed steadily as she rode up to the hideout. Her pulse raced in her veins, threatening to explode from the excitement and intensity of the moment.

The final chance to bring Wild Buck down was right before them. If they didn't manage it this time, Willa was sure they would never have another opportunity.

She clutched the necklace Theo had given her, feeling comforted as though it was a good luck charm of sorts, something to give her strength and help her achieve her goals.

She needed this reminder of why she was fighting so hard. It was for the sake of her own family, but also for Theo's.

And after this, after they finished with Wild Buck, they would move on with their lives.

They could decide what their future held… and whether or not that was a future that included the both of them staying together.

A part of Willa couldn't help but hope that Theo would want to continue working with her. Would he be interested in pursuing bounties together as a team?

Could they continue their partnership and use each other's skills? They did work well together, after all. Despite the rough start, they complemented one another.

Had Theo noticed? Was he thinking the same thing? Or was Willa being foolish and hoping for something that would never come to pass?

She couldn't think about that right now. Those types of distractions would only cause problems and she was far more interested in finishing what she had already started.

This was more important than looking ahead.

Willa paused behind one of the few trees, taking a deep breath and getting ready to put on her act. Then, in a flash, she was ready.

She rode the final paces at a gallop and dismounted in a hurry. Rushing up to the door, Willa knocked in quick succession, showing a panic that would alarm anyone.

After a moment without answer, she began getting worried. Had she made a mistake? Was she wrong about all of this—had Wild Buck and Dove already moved on?

Willa rapped her knuckles on the door once more, making the knock more insistent this time. And when she heard the heavy footsteps on the other side of the door, she knew her luck had come to pass, after all.

The door opened to reveal the man. He was handsome enough with his amber eyes, and an ugly scar on his cheek to take away from it all.

This was Wild Buck, and Willa was thrilled that she had managed to find him with her wits and a bit of luck.

But she didn't have time to bask. She had to show how frantic she was, how desperate.

"Who are you?" Buck asked in a gruff tone. There was something strangely familiar about him, but Willa ignored it—after all, she had seen and studied him so much.

“It’s the saloon. Is Dove here? The girls said Dove was here. Oh, please, sir, can you get her? I need to talk to her at once!” Willa begged, pleading with him and leaning forward in desperation.

“Huh? What are you talking about? I don’t recognize you. You ain’t one of them girls from the saloon. You’re all fancy,” he said.

“I was in town when it happened. A brawl and a shootout. It was awful. One of the girls begged me to come and find Dove. I didn’t know who Dove was, but another girl who wasn’t injured explained.

“She told me to come here and bring Dove back, that some of the girls might not make it and they want her here with them,” she explained in a hurry, the lie dripping easily from her lips.

Wild Buck’s eyes took on a hint of concern, but he was clearly still wary about this story. Willa had to convince him, had to show him how desperate she was.

“Please! What are you waiting for? Dove! Dove!” she started shouting, as if trying to get past him.

“Hold on a second,” Wild Buck insisted, turning around and looking inside. “You need to wait just a moment. She’s sleeping and I’ll have to get her. What happened? What happened at the saloon?”

“I told you! A brawl and a shootout and there was so much blood! It was everywhere. Four of the girls were injured. I don’t know if they’re going to make it.

“They wanted Dove there to be with them,” she said again, throwing out a few more little details to convey her need.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll go get her.”

“Thank you,” Willa said quickly, letting her shoulders relax slightly.

As she did so, the necklace she wore fell further from her collar and

slipped into view. Wild Buck's eyes settled on it for a moment.

He appeared haunted by a memory for only a flash before his hand was suddenly at his side.

Before she knew what had happened, Willa was staring down the barrel of a pistol.

"Where is he?" Buck asked in that gruff voice. "Where's Theo?"

## 30

"Where's Theo?" a deep, familiar voice demanded.

Theo's heart skipped a beat, but this time it wasn't for Willa. This time, he knew he'd been caught and everything was going to take a turn real fast if he didn't get it all back under control.

How had Buck known? What had happened? How had he caught Willa?

Theo raced from where he stood behind the tree. He'd left his horse a short distance away behind another, but had come as close as he dared to the cottage.

Now, as he revealed himself, Theo took in a gasp of air.

Buck was holding a gun to Willa's head.

Nothing had ever terrified Theo like this. He couldn't imagine where this was headed and he was frightened that it would end with Willa dying all because he'd failed to warn her.

"What is this, Theo? Who is she? How could you betray me like this?" Buck shouted, his nostrils flaring as he seethed with rage.

"Buck, calm down," he said, patiently.

Buck tightened his grip on Willa and she whimpered. It was clear she had no idea what was going on between the two men, but all of that

was about to change.

In a moment, she would know everything—and she would never trust Theo again.

“Buck, you need to calm down,” he said gently, wishing he’d had the guts to tell Willa. Theo was full of regret, furious that he had allowed her to come into this unprepared.

With everything that had happened in the past, Theo wanted it all to stay there, to be left behind. He didn’t want this, not this horrible threat against the woman he cared for so deeply.

And not when it was all his own fault.

“Come on, Buck, you need to calm down,” Theo said.

Instead, Buck led Willa down to meet Theo. The two men walked in circles.

Theo’s hands were up in the air, a nonthreatening attempt to show that he wasn’t going to hurt Buck, that he was willing to reason with him.

“You want me to calm down? After everything? After how you’ve betrayed me by coming here like this? With her? You think I don’t know that you’re here to arrest me? Or worse?” Buck asked.

“We aren’t going to hurt you. But you do need to stop. This is wrong and you know it. If you just put the gun down, you can go to the sheriff and there won’t be any more consequences.

“Dove will be safe. You will serve your time. And everything is going to be fine,” Theo said.

“Serve my time?” Buck scoffed. “You know how much time I’ll be in for? Life. And more likely than not, that life is going to be cut short with a rope and a drop.”

Theo knew Buck was right. He would probably be executed for the crimes he had committed. Theft was bad enough, but murder? And all the damage he'd caused?

Buck had brought entire towns to their knees. If there was ever a man who would suffer the consequences of his actions, this was that man.

"Buck, you know better than this. You didn't have to live this way, to live this life. You could have made different choices.

But you chose to harm innocent people, and there are consequences for that. You deserve to be punished. If you will just accept that, maybe all of this can be brought to an end," Theo said.

He looked at Willa once more and saw the fear in her eyes. It was clear that she wanted to reach for her gun, but expected to be shot before she could.

Theo gave her the slightest, nearly imperceptible wince to warn her against it.

Immediately, he saw her shoulders soften, letting go of some of her tension as she accepted that this was the fate in store for her. There was no fight left.

"Let her go," Theo said, firmly. He had to help Buck see reason. "You want another murder on your hands? Something more to pay for?"

"I don't need to worry about that, Theo. You know it. They aren't going to do any more to me for one more murder than they would one less," Buck replied.

Theo knew he couldn't reason with Buck; it had been foolish of him to try. He had convinced himself that he might find success here, but it wasn't working. There was nothing to be done.

"You know, Theo, you're no better than me," Buck said, looking frustrated.

“I never killed a man who didn’t deserve it,” Theo refuted.

“No? Well, you take me in, then you’ve killed me. You may think I deserve it, but we both know that I’m still just a man. And one line I have never crossed is the one you’re crossing right now.

“I have never turned on my own brother.”

The word hung in the air like a knife and Theo took in the expression on Willa’s face, the way her lips parted ever so slightly and she glanced between Theo and her captor.

Recognition settled in her eyes. She knew.

She knew the secret Theo had carried with him for all this time, the reason he was so desperate to bring in Buck, the reason he couldn’t let her kill him or take him in herself.

She looked shocked and hurt. She would never forgive him, but there was nothing Theo could do about that now.

This was Theo’s mission. To take down the man who had destroyed his family.

Even when that man was a part of the very family he had destroyed.

## 31

At thirteen years of age, Theo had never anticipated that he would be standing over the graves of his mother and his father.

But there they were.

The coffins were lowered into the ground on a hot, dry day. It didn't seem right to him, even at that young age. Funerals weren't supposed to happen on hot, dry days.

They were supposed to take place in the pouring rain, with clouds overhead, where tears were indistinguishable from the drops that Heaven released upon them.

But it wasn't like that.

There was an eerie stillness in the air. A brief gust of wind stirred up some arid earth, which quickly settled.

Everything was back to the uncomfortable calm as the minister said something about ashes and dust. But Theo barely heard it. He wasn't listening.

He was just watching his mother and father go into the ground, to a place from which they would never return.

There was nothing he could do about it. He had to accept that they were gone forever and he was left with only Buck as his family now.

“It’s going to be all right,” Buck whispered, trying not to interrupt the sermon.

Theo looked up at him, trying to have some hope. But was there really any hope? Where was the hope when they had just lost their mother and father?

Who was going to look after them? How would they survive?

The funeral was brought to an end and the people from the community who had attended started walking over to say how sorry they were to Buck and Theo.

Some people averted their gaze as they awkwardly repeated the same phrase as the person before. Others—mostly the older women—looked upon them with the kind pity of a grandmother.

Those were even more painful for Theo, the way the women saw the brothers as merely orphans rather than two boys in the midst of their grief.

But it wasn’t long before everyone had filed away and Buck stood there with Theo, just the two of them.

“What are we going to do now? What’s going to happen?” Theo asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… until now, we were busy. We could talk about who was coming to the funeral, what outfits we would wear that would make Ma and Pa proud of us.

“You brought me along when you spoke with Reverend Allen about what he would say and Maisie Ross came over to let us choose what kinds of flowers she would bring to lay on the coffins. But what now?”

It was a painful question, but one that Theo needed an answer to. He couldn’t imagine what they were supposed to do now that their

parents were really gone.

Now that they had been buried, what more was there? How could they possibly continue? Who was going to be there for them?

Who would make them soup when they were ill or fix the buttons on their shirts? Who would teach them to be men, and how to use that fancy new hoe their father had bought a few weeks ago?

There were more questions than answers, and Theo hated to live his life that way. It wasn't fair. Why did he have to lose his parents? Why did other kids get to keep theirs?

There was no reason for it, and he was furious that he should have to endure this misery when other children didn't.

"Theo, I know you're upset. So am I. But I will take care of you. I will do whatever I can," Buck promised, looking down from the extra three inches he had on Theo.

He was only a couple years older and the two brothers were the best of friends. They never went anywhere without the other and no one ever saw them apart.

Most people couldn't even tell who was who because they were always seen together. There was no Buck and there was no Theo. There was only BuckandTheo.

They were a pair, never to be individuals.

"We'll run the ranch together. You and me. We will keep it going just like Pa would have wanted," Buck said.

"We can do that? Do you really think so? I mean, it's going to be hard. I don't know if we will really be able to run it like Pa did," Theo said.

"You don't think I know that? Trust me, Theo. It's going to be worth it. We're going to do a great job. Together," Buck said.

Theo wanted to trust his brother, so he nodded in agreement. They were going to do it. They would make a future for themselves, a life that was bright and promising.

No one and nothing would stand in their way because they would do this all together. They could succeed, right? Their father had taught them well.

They would even learn how to cook their own meals so they never felt lost without their mother.

It was a week later that Buck had gone into town while Theo stayed home to watch the cattle. When Buck arrived, he had a bloody nose and when Theo asked about it, Buck got defensive, saying it didn't matter.

But Theo had pushed.

He soon found out that Buck had been trying to buy some bread when he realized he didn't have enough money for it. But some of the fellas from the Miller Gang had told him to steal a loaf.

When Buck refused, they had punched him and walked off, laughing.

After Theo heard about this, he was furious. He couldn't imagine anyone ever mistreating his brother.

But a week later, Buck came home with a loaf of bread. And when Theo asked if they'd managed to sell some beef and make money, Buck had shrugged him off.

After a month, the brothers hardly wanted for anything. They had plenty of food, a new outfit each, and all the supplies they could hope for on the ranch.

Theo had wanted to ask about it, but he was afraid to. He knew he wouldn't like the answer.

“Things are different,” he told Buck one night.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we aren’t as close as we used to be,” Theo said.

“Oh, hush. You and me? We’re close. But you should know that I might be out of town for a little while.

“I have some things to do and the fellas are taking me around and teaching me some new stuff,” Buck said, vaguely.

“The fellas? What kind of new stuff? Is it about the irrigation? We need help with that. I’m worried we won’t be able to grow enough vegetables for ourselves if we don’t get it sorted,” Theo said.

Buck laughed and shook his head. “No, Theo. Not that nonsense. This is what we need so that we never have to put in the effort to grow another carrot or green bean again.

“We can buy all that stuff once I’m through with this,” he said.

Theo was uncomfortable, but didn’t want to question his big brother. And two days later, when he got up for breakfast, Theo realized that Buck was gone.

He did all he could to run the ranch on his own. It wasn’t easy for a boy of thirteen, but he wasn’t about to give in to defeat. He wanted his parents to be proud of him from up in Heaven.

It wouldn’t be right if he failed them now. And he couldn’t let Buck come home to find things in ruin. That would be awful.

If Buck ever actually came back.

For now, Theo was doing all he could for the sake of their mother and father’s legacy. This was all that was left and he wanted it to shine.

When Buck finally returned, Theo was outside, setting up a new trellis for the cucumbers after a storm had knocked the other one down. He looked up and saw Buck drawing near, a crew of eight men behind him.

Theo came running up to his brother, excited that he was finally getting to see Buck again.

“You’re home! I didn’t know if you would ever come back!” he exclaimed, eagerly.

Buck didn’t dismount to hug him or show any sign of emotion. The men behind him snickered from atop their horses and Theo wondered what was going on and why those men were there.

“Didn’t I say I’d be back? Anyway, can you get all the beds made up? The fellas are going to stay here for a while and help us run the ranch,” Buck said.

Theo’s heart sank. He didn’t want to share his brother with these awful men. He just wanted BuckandTheo back. He wanted what he’d had in the past. He wanted the life he’d always expected.

But Theo did as he was told, turning every piece of furniture into a bed so the men could all stay in the house. It was crowded and the next morning, Theo was expected to cook for them all.

He came up a bit short on the eggs, but had some pork leftover from the week before when he’d taken one of their hogs to the butcher.

The men seemed to like it well enough and Theo was put on permanent kitchen and cleaning duty while the others started to take care of the ranch.

But it turned out that they had very different ideas of what that meant.

Theo was shocked when he saw all the sheep being led out a few days

later, having been sold to a farmer an hour away.

“Buck, why are you selling all the sheep? We need them,” Theo said.

“No, we need money. The sheep will get us the money,” Buck said.

“We don’t need that much, just enough to get by. Selling all the sheep is going to leave us without the securities we needed. And now we can’t sell the wool,” Theo argued.

“Don’t question me. I know what I’m doing,” Buck snapped.

Theo never saw where the money went or how it was spent on the ranch, but he did see the hogs leave next, soon after followed by the cattle, and lastly the horses.

“All we have left are the chickens,” Theo said. “Your friends have only been here two weeks. We don’t need that kind of money in a two-week period.

“Those animals were supposed to last us a whole year. Where did the money go?”

“It went where it needed to go and that’s all you need to know about it, Theo. My goodness, you are so irritating with all your questions.

“Will you just accept that we are doing what needs to be done? And why is this place such a mess? You’re supposed to be keeping it clean,” Buck said.

“Your friends make that impossible. I spend my whole day cooking and cleaning like I’m some kind of maid. Even Ma didn’t live like this,” Theo said.

“Well, Ma didn’t live very long at all, Theo. So maybe you just need to do what you’re told and get over it,” Buck said.

“What happened to you? Why did you change so fast? What made you

like this? You're not my brother anymore," Theo said, tears pooling in his eyes.

Buck turned to him with a cold stare.

"Theo, there was only one choice for me. If I wanted my little brother to be fed, I had to steal. And if I wanted him to be protected, I had to steal not only for us, but for the gang.

"You don't know what it's like, but now, these fellas are my family," Buck said.

It was a knife in Theo's heart. How were these sleazy, messy men Buck's family?

When did it become BuckandtheMillerGang? Why was his brother being so cruel, and what could Theo do to make things right?

"Buck, please. I just want to be close again. I want us to go back to like before. You sold all the animals, so we must have money now, right? We can eat.

"Or we can even use it to pay off the gang and then we can work really hard to build the ranch back up, slowly but surely. I planted a fantastic garden," he said, hopeful that his brother would accept this offer.

But Buck shocked him by laughing instead.

"You know what your problem is, Theo? You're a weakling and a chump. You were a fool for ever trusting me in the first place. Now get out of here. I don't ever want to see you again."

Theo stood for a long moment before his brother stood and turned from him, walking away to talk to the gang.

It was the last time Theo had ever really spoken with Buck, and it was the last time he had ever felt that there was any hope.

After that, he knew he could never trust anyone else ever again.

## 32

Willa reminded herself to breathe… but she couldn't will herself to do so.

With her heart racing and the sudden realization of what she had just heard, she couldn't imagine what other surprises she was about to learn.

A tightness in her throat served as a warning. She was about to start crying and she couldn't let that happen.

Stuck in Buck's grasp, she could hardly react and yet, she knew she had to do something.

But Theo's brother? It couldn't be. How could this criminal possibly be Theo's brother? It didn't make sense and Willa's head began to swim with confusion.

How did this happen? How could she have missed such an important detail? And how long had Theo been lying to her?

Theo had kept these secrets from the beginning and Willa felt utterly betrayed by the news. If she'd had any idea, she never would have allowed Theo to take advantage of her like this.

It was too much. Too much to think that he had lied to her, that he had fooled her, that he had never cared to begin with.

She focused her attention on everything happening around her. Now

was not the time to break.

If Buck was going to hold her hostage, she had no choice but to contain her fears and think quickly as to how she was going to escape this situation.

“What’s the matter with you, Theo?” Buck asked, tightening his grip on Willa so she had to stop herself from whimpering.

“Don’t,” Theo said with worry, stretching a hand in their direction.

“Don’t what? Don’t touch your girl? Come now, Theo. You know as well as I do that a man don’t look at a woman like that if he ain’t wanting her to be more than just a little bit of fun,” Buck said, gruffly.

Theo narrowed his eyes, but Willa was ready to elbow Buck in the gut for that comment. He had no right to suggest anything between her and Theo, especially not now.

How could he think Theo cared for her when Theo had been lying all this time? Willa had no faith in her partner anymore.

“Don’t you dare hurt her, Buck. You may be famous for your exploits, but I won’t let you do anything to harm her,” Theo said.

“You never did have the stomach for a man’s world. Always fighting to do what’s right, huh? You’re still at it. But what you think is right sure doesn’t sit well with me, Theo.

“What’s right is for you to defend your brother. What’s right is that you should understand the pressure I’ve been under all these years, and know that I only did what I had to do to survive.

“So you need to get back on your horse and leave,” Buck said.

“Not until you let her go. She didn’t do anything wrong,” Theo argued, taking a step forward and trying to reason with Buck.

Willa didn't know what to think. Why was Theo trying to defend her at all? He had proven himself untrustworthy, but he had also proven that she wasn't his priority.

All this time, he'd been trying to protect Buck from Willa. And now he was acting like he was trying to do the opposite? That he wanted to keep Willa safe from Buck?

No. If that had been his goal, he would have done the right thing way back when they'd first met. He would have let Willa take Buck in. Dead or alive.

She could have finished this, but he had been so busy looking after a terrible criminal that nothing else had mattered to him.

"I said to let her go!" Theo demanded, taking another step forward.

"Enough of that! I can't let her go and you know it. What have you done, Theo? You brought this woman to my door, knowing she would kill me in an instant if I hadn't gotten her first?

"You're no brother of mine. You're a coward—a coward and a traitor. You don't deserve a woman like her," Buck spat.

"None of this is about Willa," Theo said. "You're using her as a pawn, but this is about all the other people you've hurt. This is about getting justice for them and for their families.

"Whatever you have against Willa, you have taken this too far. Just let her go, Buck."

Buck didn't budge. His bullish frame was sturdy enough that Willa knew he would not be moved.

Even if she tried to break free, there was no hope, no chance that she would ever manage to escape him. She found herself wishing that she had shot him the moment she saw him in that saloon.

It would have saved her all this trouble. She never would have interacted with Theo again. She never would have felt a surge of affection for him in her heart.

She never would have been betrayed by him.

And she never would have ended up here.

“What next, little brother? Are you going to shoot me? Now that you know I won’t let your girl go free, that’s the logical step, isn’t it?” Buck mocked.

Theo aimed his gun directly at them, but he was hesitant. Willa held her breath, knowing she was just as likely to get hit as Buck was.

There was no clear way of shooting just Buck. Willa would be wounded or killed, as well.

Buck laughed, clearly realizing this. He had done a fine job of positioning himself so that he was safe. Unless Theo got very creative or managed a perfect bullseye, there was nothing to be done.

“What is it? Don’t think you can hit me without killing your girl? No, I don’t think so, either. A man with twice your shooting ability wouldn’t take that risk, now would he?

“So, what are you going to do, Theo? Are you ready to give up?” Buck asked.

Having seen Theo’s shooting ability, Willa knew he was one of the best. Still, Buck was right.

It would be an awful risk, and Willa was torn between her hope that Theo would do the right thing and get rid of Buck once and for all versus her impulse to stay alive.

No matter how desperately she longed to see Buck put away for good, she couldn’t let go of the self-preservation in her heart, worrying that

Theo might decide to take the risk and pull the trigger.

Theo, however, made no such move. He held the gun steady, but his eyes darted between his target and Willa. The moment was sheer torment; all she wanted was for Theo to make a decision.

The suspense was driving her mad and the standoff was dragging on too long. She was certain that, if they didn't finish this soon, tensions would only rise.

"It's all right, Buck," Theo said, exhaling slowly and calmly. "If you just let Willa go, we will leave you alone. That's all there is to it. You can go free.

"You won't have to worry about anything anymore. How does that sound? Is that a decent option for you?"

Buck's grip slackened just the slightest bit as Theo worked to defuse the situation. Willa realized Theo's words were beginning to have their desired effect.

Maybe this really was the end of the matter. He would let her go and then Theo would take off and let Buck go free.

But Willa had no intention of letting that happen. She began to work a plan in her own mind, how she might ensure that Buck still paid for his crimes. After all, this was Theo's promise—not hers.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, Buck tightened his arm around her once more and he started to laugh a bitter, husky laugh. Her heart sank as she realized Buck was only mocking them.

He was just teasing them with his games, pretending he would actually consider being generous and releasing Willa. It was all in an effort to give them hope and then take it away.

"You think I believe you, Theo? You think there's any way to go back now? I ain't as big a fool as you are. I know who my enemy is and I

ain't about to give you an inch.

"You'll only run off and find yourself making plans to come back later. That's what a traitor does. He's a coward, and then he scurries back to try and finish the job," Buck said.

"It's not true, Buck. You know I never meant to betray you. All I ever wanted was for us to be close again, to be brothers again.

"I didn't ask you to become the man that you are, and it was never anything forced on you. You didn't have to choose this—you did it because you were greedy and you wanted power.

"Now, let Willa go. I assure you that I'll never come back here. I'll leave you alone," Theo insisted.

Willa couldn't take much more of this. She had never been the sort of woman to just stand around waiting for someone else to defend her. It was time to act if she was going to get out of this.

Buck's grip was strong. She took a moment to observe the feel of his arm that held her.

She would need to put all her strength into it, and she still might not manage to break free. If she could at least reach her gun, it would help, but that wasn't an option while she was trapped like this.

As the brothers continued arguing, Willa made a difficult choice. Although she felt guilty about it, she couldn't let herself worry about Theo.

She would do her best to incapacitate Buck for the both of them, but if Theo made the decision to trust his brother, or at least try to give him a chance, Willa could do nothing for him.

He would be on his own.

Accepting that possibility, Willa finally threw all her weight down

hard, breaking Buck's grasp in the midst of his surprise. She made a long chopping motion, striking Buck's outstretched arm and causing him to drop his gun.

At last, she was free.

Scrambling toward Theo, Willa wanted to give him the chance to run with her. She reached him and he seemed too stunned to know what to do.

"Come on! Let's get out of here! Are you coming with me?" she asked.

He was clearly flustered, but Theo nodded and took Willa's arm. They bolted for the horses just as the sound of gunfire rang through the air.

Willa's skirts swished as she dug for the hidden pocket and she finally drew her gun. While she was spinning to aim at Buck, a bullet whizzed past her, nearly grazing her weapon and causing her to drop it.

Theo shot back at Buck, who dove behind a few boxes on the porch. Willa crawled on the ground, trying to reach her gun while still avoiding the gunfire.

"Willa, get behind me!" Theo shouted.

"I just have to get my gun! We can finish this," she called back.

It was utter mayhem, and Willa wanted to do her part to finish the fight and get rid of Buck forever. He had ruined everything for her, but she tried not to focus on revenge.

This was still about justice, wasn't it?

Just as Willa reached for her gun, she heard the sound of a rifle cocking. Looking up, she saw that Buck had more than just his pistol. And he planned to use it.

“No!” Theo cried, diving to cover Willa as Buck took aim.

Willa couldn’t breathe. It was all a sudden burst. The explosion from the barrel. The heaviness on top of her.

The red stain that was growing on her dress.

## 33

“Theo? Theo!”

Willa screamed his name as she pushed Theo onto his back. Buck was nowhere to be seen, but Willa was hardly paying attention to him anyway.

Her focus was on the pool of blood on the left side of Theo’s abdomen.

“Theo, can you hear me? Can you hear me?” she begged, blinking away the tears that clouded her vision while she hurriedly removed his shirt to inspect the wound better.

Though he looked up at her and gave a groan, his eyes were open and his breathing sounded ragged, but steady. He was still alive, and that was a small peace to comfort her in the midst of such a shocking moment.

“Let me take a closer look at you,” she said. Her voice cracked as she welled up with emotion, but Willa tried to ignore the pain of wondering whether or not he was going to make it.

Once his shirt had been pulled back, Willa had to try and stop the blood so she could see how bad the injury was.

“It… I…” Theo struggled to speak, but he gave Willa a faint smile to let her know that he was at least cogent.

She used her skirt to clean him up a bit and saw that the bullet had

gone straight through, right along his side. It didn't seem that any important organs had been punctured.

"Theo? Are you all right? It's not nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be.

"It's just along your side here. You're bleeding a lot, but I think you'll be fine as long as we get it to stop," Willa said, explaining it all in a hurry.

"S-sorry," he groaned. "I wanted to… to say that it's going to be f-fine. But it hurts."

"I know you're in pain. You don't have to talk, but I do want to hold this on here a little longer. Do you see yarrow flowers anywhere?

"I normally use it on little cuts and haven't ever tried it for something like this, but it certainly can't hurt," she said, her eyes searching the ground nearby.

"W-Willa, stop," Theo said. "Yarrow isn't going to cure a gunshot wound. I'm all… I'm all right.

"I'll be fine, but I'm injured. It's just going to take me a few minutes to sit up before we can head into town for the doctor."

Willa thought he was probably overestimating his strength, but the fact was, Theo had surprised her before. Of course, in the past, she hadn't minded those surprises.

She had been rather delighted to find out how strong he was, but that was nothing like the surprise she had discovered just a short time ago.

It wasn't the same as learning that Theo had lied about his brother.

"I know you're mad at me," he said, grunting and squeezing his eyes shut as he sat up. Willa helped him, trying to ignore his observation.

“Enough about that right now. Your brother just shot you,” she said.

“And I should have told you sooner. I should have told you who he was, why I was trying so hard to get to him, why I didn’t let you shoot him in the saloon when you had the chance,” he continued.

Willa wanted to rest in her relief that Theo was going to survive, but the fury began to rise up within her once more as Theo continued to apologize.

She couldn’t keep her anger at bay, not even when she was happy that Theo wasn’t going to die, even when she was terrified because they were still on Buck’s turf and didn’t know where he’d gone.

As she cycled through all these emotions, Willa struggled to know exactly what she should do next. It wasn’t feasible that she could simply walk away from all of this, but she was heartbroken.

No matter how many times she repeated it in her mind, and even as Theo was continuing to tell her how sorry he was, Willa couldn’t believe that he had lied to her.

It didn’t seem possible that he would turn out to be the kind of man who would put her in grave danger and never even tell her why or warn her about the potential consequences.

If Theo had at least told her the truth, she would have taken off the necklace. She would have been able to hide the fact that she was there with Theo and Buck never would have been the wiser.

But the worst part was simply knowing that Theo didn’t trust her.

Yes, if there was anything that broke her heart, it was that he didn’t think he could tell her the truth, that he didn’t believe she was worthy of it. She didn’t mean enough to him that he could tell her.

“Willa? Did you hear me? I know I should have told you,” he said, still trying to apologize. Theo was able to sit up, but he held the skirt to

his abdomen while Willa tried to cut the fabric free.

She didn't like being this close to him right now. If he was going to survive, she could be happy about that without needing to stay with him.

"I heard you," she said as the skirt tore. "But right now, I'm just focusing on making sure you don't bleed to death."

"We both know it's not as bad as it looks. A fraction more to the left and it would have been a graze. It hurts, but it's not going to keep me down for long," he said.

But Willa saw his teeth gritted together from the pain and knew Theo was just trying to be brave. No matter what, he was definitely in some pain.

"Glad to hear that. But you might want to get it stitched up soon," she said, pushing away all emotion and trying to remain cold.

"Well, I suppose we had best get a move on and try to catch up to Buck," Theo said.

"Catch up? Did you see where he went? And how exactly are you going to be fast enough to catch him?" Willa scoffed.

"Well… I didn't see which direction he went, but I'm sure we can ride out and find him. He can't have gotten too far.

"Don't you think we just need to mobilize and get out there? It won't take too much, I'm sure," Theo said with determination.

"Theo, your injury may not be life-threatening, but you're still hurt. And Buck is long gone. There's no way we can find him and, even if there was, it's clear you and I can't keep working together.

"So, if you want to be smart, you go back to town and have a doctor look you over. I, on the other hand, need to take some time to figure

out my next steps, whatever they may be," Willa said.

Theo stared at her for a long moment and Willa clenched her jaw to stay firm and not allow her emotions to get the best of her. She had to remain cold if she was going to do this the right way.

"Willa? What do you mean? You don't want to work together? But why not? We just need to figure out the best strategy for finding him, that's all. We were so close. We can't give up now," Theo said.

"I'm not giving up," Willa said resolutely, turning on him with cold anger in her eyes. "I'm not giving up on finding Buck, Theo.

"I'm giving up on finding him with you. Don't you understand? You made it clear that you don't trust me, so why should I trust you?"

Theo took a sharp breath and Willa ignored the pain in his eyes. She couldn't let herself feel pity for him. He had brought this upon himself.

If he hadn't wanted Willa to walk away, he should have been honest with her from the beginning.

Never again would she allow herself to be used and mistreated like this. She had to believe she deserved better.

"Willa, I'm sorry. I know I made a mistake, but let me make it right. I can do that. I can fix this. We just need to do this differently. I'm sure that you can understand why I didn't tell you.

"I'm ashamed of my brother. I don't want to be, but I am. He… oh, Willa, please understand that I just didn't want you to know who I was related to or why I was trying to bring him in without you killing him," Theo said.

Willa shut out his voice. She made her way to her horse and dug through her pack to find another strip of cloth. Quickly, she walked back to Theo, who was trying to stand but seemed to struggle.

Willa tossed down the cloth and nodded to his side. “You’ll need to hold that on there pretty tightly, but I expect you will bleed through the one you have now.

“This should help. Get back to the town soon and find the doctor. Take your time to rest,” she said.

With that, she walked away from him once more.

“Willa, wait!” Theo shouted.

But she refused, storming ahead without another thought. Willa reached her horse and mounted, knowing it was going to take every ounce of strength she had to leave Theo behind.

It killed her to have to go, knowing she couldn’t stay with him. This was the most painful moment of her life. But it was the right thing to do.

Willa had been alone for most of her life. Ever since that night with the fire, she’d had to accept that she would likely spend the remainder of it on her own.

There was no reason to have hope for anything different. After all, the world was full of pain and sadness, and there would forever be people who needed to go it alone.

If this was her only chance to be close to someone, it wasn’t worth it. If she had to accept lies and pain and a lack of transparency, she would rather live without any of it.

But did she really want to live without Theo? Wasn’t he worth those things?

Willa silenced that voice. She was finished. She had given him enough chances and she would be fine without him.

She would have to be.

## 34

"Willa, wait!" Theo called as he watched her go. His heart ached far worse than any through-and-through bullet wound.

How had he let it reach this point? How had he managed to ruin everything he'd hoped for with Willa?

What he had done was an awful thing, and all the dangers they'd faced that day could have been avoided if only he had been honest with her. But was it really enough for her to abandon him?

Theo couldn't believe that in one day, he'd managed to lose both his brother and the woman who had come to mean more to him than anyone. He was crushed by the realization that, once she was gone, she wasn't coming back.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't risk losing her forever.

She had just mounted and was ready to ride off, but Theo couldn't watch her go and let himself live with the regret of all that had passed between them. It was time to go after the woman he loved.

Theo groaned as he managed to pull himself up to his full height, standing and trying not to fall over from the loss of blood and lightheadedness.

He wasn't sure he would make it as far as his horse, but through sheer willpower, he was determined to try.

Soon, he grasped hold of the saddle and took a deep breath before hoisting himself up as best he could, nearly falling once. The fabric at his side was beginning to soak through, but Theo ignored it.

He had love to pursue.

Willa was gone from view, but he had seen the direction in which she'd been heading.

More than likely, she had made it far enough along the road that she was over the hill and heading toward the next valley. If he rode fast, he could watch up to her.

But as soon as Theo got his horse to a gallop, he knew that wasn't going to be possible. He was in far too much agony to ride at that pace and it simply wasn't feasible for him.

He had no choice but to slow down a little and hope Willa would stop for the night and make camp somewhere along the way.

Theo rode for a while at a slower pace, drinking from his canteen every now and then to keep up his strength. Looking at the injury, he saw that it was starting to clot.

Sure, he needed to head back and find a doctor, but that wasn't going to happen yet and he had powered through injuries like this in the past. For now, he just needed Willa.

The sun started to fade from the sky, alerting Theo to the fact that it was about to get a whole lot more difficult to find her. If he wasn't careful, he might ride straight past her and not even realize that he'd missed her along the way.

As he made his way through the prairie, Theo was thankful at least for a large, nearly full moon. He might be able to see smoke from Willa's fire if she made camp, or he would notice any towns nearby if she had decided to stay in one.

He only hoped she hadn't tricked him and doubled back somewhere along the way.

But as he continued to ride, the moonlight did Theo the favor he had hoped for. It shone down on the beautiful, golden hair of a striking woman.

A perfectly imperfect, tough and tender, brave and fierce and delicate woman.

She looked the same as the first night they had camped together. He had gazed upon her hair then, as well, but he hadn't wanted to admit that he found her so beautiful.

A part of him hadn't been able to let go back then, hadn't been able to admit how much he liked her. It was a dangerous position to be in.

But now, things had changed dramatically. He realized how much she meant to him and how much he needed her in his life.

There was no reason to risk losing her again. Not when they were so close to moving forward and finding happiness together.

Sure, Willa was furious with him, but he couldn't let her give up without a fight. He needed her to know how much he loved her.

With that, Theo spurred his horse forward, racing as fast as he could along the prairie to catch up to Willa. She had slowed down, mercifully so.

Theo was relieved that she was going at this pace, knowing it meant he would reach her sooner and be able to stop her before she realized that he was so close upon her.

As he drew near, Willa turned and looked back at him. In the dark, he couldn't see the look on her face, but Theo watched her speed forward, her horse suddenly racing on.

He wasn't going to let that happen. He wouldn't let her get away, even if it meant pushing through the searing pain in his side.

Theo charged ahead, full speed, and had nearly caught up to her when Willa turned again. In that moment of her distraction, Theo saw his chance to push his horse just a little faster, enough to close the distance and get in front of Willa and her horse.

"Slow down!" he shouted back at her.

"No! Get out of my way!" she cried back.

"Willa, I'm about to make my horse stop right in front of you and if you don't pull back, you're going to crash into me, injuring both of us and our horses, as well. Do you want that?" he called to her.

Theo watched as she pulled back on the reins, apparently not wanting to take the chance that he was being honest. With that, Theo, too, slowed down and brought his horse to a stop in front of her.

"Can we talk for just a moment?" he asked.

"Talk," she replied, harshly.

"I mean like civilized people. Can we dismount?" he asked, hoping she would be willing to give him a chance to genuinely talk through matters.

"Why is it so important to you?"

"Because I have a lot to say and a lot to explain. I also wouldn't mind if you give me some stitches," he said, doing his best to sound tough and not show just how hard the ride had been on him.

"I told you to go to the doctor," she said.

"You did, but I need to talk to you and I'm sure you've had to stitch someone up before, knowing the line of work you're in," he said,

recalling the injuries he'd seen since becoming a bounty hunter.

Willa sighed and dismounted and Theo did the same, coming to stand beside her.

"Want me to stitch you up before you start talking? Something tells me that once I hear whatever you have to say, I'm going to get right back up on my horse and take off," she said.

"Then let's wait until after I've said what I need to say. If you still don't want to hear it, I'll go back toward town and find the doctor. How does that sound?" he asked.

"All right, then," Willa relented.

With that, Theo knew he finally had his chance.

"Willa, you have to know the truth. I need you to understand that I never wanted to lie to you.

"Almost immediately after we started working together, I wanted to tell you everything, but there were a lot of reasons that I didn't think I could. You see, things with my brother are incredibly complicated.

"He wasn't always like this, but when he changed… well, everything changed," he began.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Willa asked in exasperation.

"Buck was a good boy, honestly. He always had a bit of a wild side, but he obeyed Ma and Pa most of the time and always accepted his punishment when he didn't.

"I looked up to him and he was the one who really guided me in life at times," he explained.

"But when we were just boys, our ma and pa died, and it took us by surprise. Buck was at that age when a boy thinks he's a man and he

promised he would look out for me, the way he always had.

“We knew taking care of the ranch was going to be tough, just the two of us, but we were determined to try,” Theo continued.

Willa looked at him in the moonlight, her eyes curious, but still hard with anger and hurt. It was going to take a good, long while before she would trust him again, but if telling her all of this could help, Theo would push through the pain and finish the story.

“It was only a couple weeks before the gang realized that we were vulnerable. They started coming to Buck and I didn’t rightly know what was going on.

“I didn’t understand what they wanted with my brother, but I tried to have faith that he would do the right thing, that he was only trying to keep them at bay and look out for me.

“It turned out, however, that Buck was weaker than I’d ever imagined.”

At last, Willa’s eyes softened. Perhaps it was from seeing his heartache or perhaps she just felt bad for the little boy Theo had been, he wasn’t sure why.

It didn’t matter, however. She was growing more gentle, and that was the difference he needed to see in her.

“Anyway, Buck started allowing the gang to stay in our house. They made such a mess of things, things my ma and pa had worked hard for.

“And they started to sell the animals so they could make some money. Eventually, they even sold the land. Buck went along and did everything with them.

“He became greedy and arrogant, finding them to be more of a family than I was,” he continued.

“Where did you go? If you were so young…” Willa trailed off, pity in her gaze.

“I had a distant cousin in another town. I’d only met him once before, but I stayed there for a couple months before he got married and I had to leave.

“By then, there was nothing he could do about Buck—not that he really had any authority before that. And once he married, I knew I shouldn’t stay.

“He kindly offered, but I didn’t want to impose. So, I started to move from place to place. I found odd jobs in every town I visited,” he said.

“One day, I helped a sheriff in town catch a criminal by putting clues together. He told me I ought to think about being a deputy, but I didn’t want to stay in one place like that.

“I didn’t want to get close to anyone again. I started hunting, figuring that catching fellas on the run was as good as being a sheriff and I could make some decent money while I did it,” he confessed.

“That must have been very difficult to go through,” Willa said with compassion.

“It was. But then, I started to hear about a fella who went by the name of Wild Buck. He was rampaging through towns and destroying everything in his path.

“I couldn’t believe it. When I heard the list of crimes, I thought there was no way that could be my brother,” he said. “But now I know better.”

A burden was lifted from Theo’s shoulders as he told Willa about all of this. No matter how difficult it was to share with her, he knew it was the right thing to do.

She needed to know the truth about his life, and it was the only way

he could ever convince her to give him another chance. He didn't really deserve a chance after all that had happened, but he hoped with all his heart that this would make a difference.

"I had no idea he treated you like that," Willa said apologetically.

"Of course you didn't. I was a fool and I never told you. This is my fault, Willa. I was the one who let all of this happen.

"You did everything you could to do the right thing and capture Buck, but I nearly lost you because of my lies and… and I can't lose you," he said.

Willa looked down and away. Theo sensed her hesitancy, but he didn't want her to be so overwhelmed by his words.

And yet, he had to say them. He had to find a way to make her realize how much she meant to him.

"Listen, Willa. You need to know that I care for you more than I have ever cared for anyone in all my life. I need you. I need you to be here with me.

"If you're not…I don't know how I could possibly go on without you," Theo said.

"You don't know what you're saying," Willa said, shaking her head.

"I do. Throughout the time we have been together, I realized early on that my feelings were shifting. And now, I know the truth," he said.

She looked up at him once more, in anticipation of his words.

"I love you, Willa. I have fallen deeply in love with you, and I can't express how much you mean to me. I will never lie to you again.

"I promise, I won't hide the truth. All I want from you is one more chance to prove that I can be the man you deserve," Theo said.

Willa was quiet for only a moment before she leaned in and kissed Theo, tears streaming down her cheeks.

In that moment, feeling her lips on his own, Theo could hardly believe how fortunate he was. How had he found this incredible woman? How was he so lucky to be with her?

And how was it that she was willing to give him another chance after everything he had put her through?

Instead of continuing to ask all those questions, Theo decided to lean into his happiness and just accept it. There had never been a day like this in his life before, never been such a moment.

He trusted Willa implicitly and he no longer felt a need to push her away.

But when Willa did pull back and he wanted to draw her close again, she smiled at him for a moment before speaking.

“I suppose I ought to tell you that I love you, too,” she said with a laugh.

They were the only words Theo wanted to hear. Once more, he drew her close for another gentle and passionate kiss.

## 35

Willa quickly finished up Theo's stitching, straining her eyes in the faint light.

She wished she'd thought to bring proper supplies for doing this, but her sewing kit was their only option and soon enough, Theo was ready.

He groaned as she helped him mount his horse once more and he looked at her with a grimace. "That was not fun," he said.

"Which is why we need to avoid getting shot at. Come on, let's go. Buck has a head start on us, but it's wide-open prairie and I'll bet he stopped somewhere for the night.

"There are only a few towns up ahead, and that means he doesn't have many places to hide," Willa said.

"I know. We'll do the best we can," Theo agreed.

Dawn was approaching soon enough and they were sure Buck hadn't ridden all night like they had. He had friends who could help him hide, but out here, there weren't a whole lot of options.

Confident that he hadn't doubled back toward Coarsegold, this was the best chance they had to look for him.

"We'll find him, Theo. I'm sure of it. We're going to put an end to this. We will stop Buck once and for all," Willa declared.

She truly did feel confident, despite the tense situation. No matter how difficult the circumstances, Willa trusted that they would manage to track Buck down and stop him from hurting anyone else.

It had been such a fight to get this far, but they just needed to push a little bit longer—and, with the faint pink glow upon the horizon, she trusted it would be the end of things.

They were about to have light and would more easily manage to track Buck by finding whatever path he may have left behind.

“What do you think? Do you expect he rode all the way to Morganville for the night or would he have just stayed outside?” Willa asked Theo, wanting to ensure that he had a say in their steps.

He was being extra cautious about speaking up, as if still trying to apologize to her. No matter how much she insisted that all was forgiven, it was clear that he wanted to tread lightly.

By asking him questions, Willa trusted she would get him out of his shell a bit and he would be willing to speak more freely.

“I think he’ll be outside,” he said at last. “Something tells me Buck isn’t going to try hiding out any longer by going into town to keep away.

“There are too many people now who know he’s being hunted. While he may not have a whole lot of cover out here in the prairie, he’s going to think it’s safer to be in an open space than at an inn with only eight rooms.”

It made perfect sense to Willa and she wholeheartedly agreed with Theo’s assessment. This seemed the most likely action for a man like Buck who was trying to evade them.

After all, he would probably assume that Willa would want the same comforts as any other woman, that she would do whatever it might take to hole up in a boarding house if that meant she could sleep in a

real bed.

It had been one of the greatest benefits of being a female bounty hunter, the way her bounty would make assumptions about her. It enabled her to catch them off-guard, get them when they least expected to be taken down.

The thrill she felt when that happened gave her an edge over the criminals.

But Willa wasn't only worried about finding Buck. She was worried about Theo whenever that actually happened.

Although she knew she could trust him, she also knew his heart well enough to know that Theo wasn't going to find it easy bringing Buck down.

It would be a hard task, managing to capture his own brother even when there could be a greater cost.

The cost might even be Buck's life. Would Theo be able to kill his own brother? Could he do what was necessary to bring an end to Buck's life if it was the only choice?

What if there was no other way to get him to stop his actions and he put up a fight that meant it was him or them?

She looked over at Theo as they rode, the sun rising up ahead of them. But the first thing she noticed was his expression as he looked along the road.

Willa pulled her horse to a halt and Theo did the same. They dismounted and looked at the dusty, cracked ground.

There were tracks, and they were recent—certainly within the past few hours. They showed the hooves of a horse being run too hard.

"It's Buck. I'm sure of it," Willa said.

“I think you’re right. He must have come out here and gone for all he was worth. He was going fast, but I doubt his horse could have gone on like that much farther,” Theo said.

Willa looked up at him and took a deep breath, knowing she had to be sure he was ready. “All we have to do now is follow him,” she said.

“Sure do,” Theo said, keeping his eyes down.

“Is this what you really want? You know it’s going to be hard. You know it might end badly. I want you to be sure before we go there.

“I don’t mind doing it on my own and splitting the bounty with you, if that will make it easier,” she promised him.

“Willa, we’re in this together. This is what I want,” Theo said.

“You know what might happen,” she reminded him, the faint threat looming that Theo would have to kill his own brother for their sake.

Theo swallowed hard and looked up at Willa with a single nod.

“This is what I want,” he said with determination.

Willa knew this wasn’t about revenge on Theo’s own behalf. He wasn’t simply trying to get his brother back for hurts long ago.

Theo had done everything he could to bring Buck in peacefully because he wasn’t the sort of man to try for anything else. But now, the time had come to make a difficult decision, and Theo clearly knew the right thing to do.

Willa was proud of him, although she could imagine how hard this was for him. Nevertheless, she believed Theo when he said he was ready. She had to.

“All right, then. We had best be on our way,” Willa said, inhaling the fresh, morning air. It was already warm due to the season and Willa

missed the freshness of dew.

She never liked riding when it was hot out, and she hoped they would make enough progress over the next few hours that they could avoid some of the blistering heat that would come later on.

She and Theo each mounted their horses and set out again—not at a gallop by any means, but at a reasonable pace.

“What’s the plan?” Theo asked, looking over at her.

“I was just about to ask you the same question. We’ve tried a few things already and they haven’t worked. The last thing Buck asked for was to see you. I don’t know how safe that is,” Willa said.

“I think it’s the only shot we have. If I go on ahead and face him, Buck won’t be able to resist talking. And once we get him talking, we get our advantage,” Theo said.

Willa nodded, agreeing it was a reasonable plan but still frightened for Theo’s safety. “So, do we just walk straight up to him when we see him?” she asked.

“Let’s just keep following the tracks until we spot him. At that point, let me go in front and talk to him. I won’t have my gun drawn right away, but you will.

“You can stand behind me. The moment he makes any threatening move, I’ll draw. If I have a chance to calm him, I will, so he doesn’t shoot right away, but I’ll still keep my weapon ready,” Theo said.

“Are you sure it’s wise to approach him without your weapon ready?” Willa asked, feeling even more nervous than she already was.

“I think it’s the only chance I have at a peaceful dialogue. It might not lead to that at all, but if I come armed, he will immediately be hostile no matter what.

“At least this gives us a small chance that he will listen before responding,” Theo said.

Willa nodded, not entirely comfortable with the plan but not wanting to refute Theo’s idea.

“Anyway, like I said, you’ll stand behind me. But if Buck draws, if he shows any sign that he’s going to shoot, we both fire. No hesitation,” Theo said, his voice wavering with the words.

Willa couldn’t imagine how hard this was for him. She knew Theo must find it agonizing to discuss a plan that involved killing his own brother, and she admired his strength to do the right thing.

But there was still a part of Willa that doubted Theo.

She wondered if he would really be able to do it. Sure, he knew what was right, but knowing was very different from making the decision to go through with it and to kill his own brother.

Then again, she had learned by now how important it was to trust Theo, to have faith that he would do the right thing and stand firm even in the midst of a challenge like this one. After all, he had proven already that he was willing to make sacrifices.

He had been the reason Willa wasn’t shot. He had stopped that bullet by jumping in front of her. Such an act wasn’t lightly offered. It was a sign that Theo knew who he was willing to protect.

Buck was no longer one of those people.

“What do you think, Willa?” Theo asked after her lengthy silence.

She looked at him with a sad smile, knowing how likely this resolution would be. With such a great cost, she couldn’t help but admire Theo even more than she had before.

“I think it’s our only option,” she said. “And I have never trusted you

more.”

## 36

The tracks were still clear as they went along the road, and Theo looked up ahead to see them trailing off to the left. A small grove of trees offered just enough cover to keep a man hidden.

He didn't want to say anything right away, just in case he was wrong, but with the sun lighting up the road ahead as they drew slightly nearer, he knew without a doubt that this was where Buck had gone.

It was the best spot for a hideout and there had to be excellent resources within the grove. Any man would be lucky to find a spot like that if he were on the run.

"Willa…" Theo began, getting her attention.

She looked off in the same direction and gasped.

"See up there? The tracks are heading toward the trees. I think we've found him," he said with a sigh, his heart racing as he realized that the time had come.

He didn't want to disappoint Willa, and this was the right thing to do. He needed to stop his brother from hurting anyone else.

The only way to ensure that happened was to stand against him and either take him in to the nearest sheriff… or to end Buck's life forever.

"I think you're right," Willa said.

“I suppose this is it, then. We just need to head toward the trees and we can finish this off for good. If we manage to bring him in, it will be a miracle, but it’s a miracle I’m hoping for,” Theo said.

“As am I. With everything I feel toward your brother, I promise I won’t shoot unless he gives me no other choice,” Willa said.

“And if he gives us no other choice, I promise that I will, too,” Theo added.

Willa looked at him hesitantly and he knew she was trying to think of something compassionate to say. But Theo didn’t need to hear it.

He just gave her a sad smile and looked away, hoping Willa would understand that he didn’t want her pity or even her sympathy. He just wanted to know that he wasn’t alone.

“And if that is Buck, I need to ask you one more time if you’re sure this is what you want. I trust you, Theo, but I can’t make you do this if you aren’t ready.

“I can handle him on my own. I promise. Just say the word and I won’t put you in the position of possibly having to shoot.”

As tempting as the offer was, Theo couldn’t be a coward. He didn’t want to put Willa’s life in jeopardy, and he had to face his brother once and for all.

This was what it would take to keep people safe from Buck. And if Theo was going to help others, if he was going to ensure that justice was served and no one else had to suffer as a result of his brother’s actions, he was ready to take a stand.

Theo gave a firm nod and breathed in deeply, exhaling slowly. Yes, he could do this. He was ready. But it was going to break his heart if this ended badly.

“I’m ready, Willa. I might be a mess at the end of it, but I’m ready,” he

told her.

“I can handle messes just fine,” Willa said, sweetly.

Theo was grateful for her care and knew how lucky he was to have a woman like her beside him, even now in the midst of a horrible day when he would have to choose whether or not to execute his own brother.

He simply hoped that Buck would comply, that he would make the right choice. If he did, it would save them a whole lot of sadness.

Theo couldn’t imagine what he would feel afterward if he did end up having to shoot, but he didn’t want to think about it now.

If he let himself dwell on what he might have to do, he would only end up making a mistake or being so emotional that he would freeze up and be useless to Willa when she needed him the most.

He thought back to those days when he and Buck would play together as children. It was such a long time ago and they were both very different boys.

But they had been happy, and Theo had admired his brother so much.

Now, it was Theo’s turn to be some kind of hero, even if he didn’t think that was really the right title for it. After all, with everything that had led to this moment, he had been anything but a hero.

He had been afraid, anxious, and even a liar. But not a hero.

And yet, for some strange reason, Willa had started to treat him like one ever since he admitted the truth to her. Now, she was letting him make the decisions and lead her in all of this.

Maybe honesty was all he’d ever needed to be a hero. Or maybe he was just in a situation where he had no choice.

“All right, Theo. Let’s go ahead and dismount here and we can walk the rest of the way. It’s not far and our horses will be ready if we need them,” Willa suggested.

“That sounds like a good idea. Let’s make our way over there and see what’s going to happen. But whatever you do, Willa, stay behind me.

“I won’t risk him killing you just because he has a chance to do it. I know my brother is a bad man, we can’t give him a chance to do these things,” Theo said with a sigh.

Willa nodded and looked at him with compassion. She reached over and gave his shoulder a squeeze.

“Thanks,” he said, quietly.

“I’m here for you and I’m here with you. You need both of those things right now, and you have them. Just tell me anything you need from me and I’ll make sure I can help, Theo,” she said.

“All I need from you is your safety,” he replied, meaning it with all his heart.

Without a doubt that Buck was hiding in the trees, Theo turned toward them and threw his leg over the saddle. He was shaking as he tried to climb down, but Willa was right beside him and helped him land safely on the ground.

He was overwhelmed by the task set before him, knowing the sort of pressure he was now under.

But before he could make his way into the grove, Willa took him in her arms and drew him close. It felt incredible to have a woman care for him so much and to be his comfort.

Although he hoped that the future would see only him comforting Willa, he couldn’t help but be grateful for it in that moment.

“It’s all going to be all right, Theo,” she said. “I know this is hard. I can’t imagine what you must be feeling right now. But everything will be all right. I’m sure of it.

“Because there is nothing in this world that can stop you from being the very best of men. You have already proven your quality, proven that you are a good and decent man.

“And although I can’t say what might happen next, I do know we can do this. Together. You can trust me.”

Theo looked her directly in the eye and smiled, putting his hand on her cheek.

“You know, you’re the best bounty hunter I’ve ever known. With you by my side, I have no doubts at all. You’re right, Willa. We can do this.

“No matter what happens, we can do this,” Theo said, repeating the words they both seemed to cling to.

But it wasn’t trusting Willa that Theo struggled with. It was trusting himself.

Could he really pull a gun on his brother? When the moment came—as it soon would—would he be able to shoot if he had to?

Buck was the only family Theo had left. It seemed impossible to think that he would be killing him. Even the cousin Theo had stayed with all those years ago had succumbed to a snake bite.

There was no one else. Buck was the final link to Theo’s family—without him, Theo really would be all alone.

For years, all he had wanted was to find the chance to talk with Buck, to ask him what had happened and to remind him of the boy he was all those years ago—the boy who had looked after Theo and made promises to take care of him.

That boy was gone, but Theo didn't understand how someone could just go away like that. It didn't make any sense.

Theo wanted to save Buck from the man he had become, but he knew it was probably too late. Buck had already made it clear that he wouldn't turn around, wouldn't get himself under control.

Was it even worth it for Theo? Was he doing the right thing when Buck didn't want to be helped?

He knew this was his last opportunity to ask those questions. If Buck didn't immediately shoot, Theo might even have a chance to get in a question or two.

But Theo didn't expect much. He couldn't let himself expect anything from his brother. Not when that man was as barbaric as Buck had become.

"Theo?"

Willa's voice was gentle and soft, full of compassion and kindness, but it was still painful to hear her say his name that way. It was a light prodding, a reminder that if they were going to do this, it was time to move onward.

"Yeah," Theo grunted. "Let's go."

They started for the grove only a short distance away. Keeping light on their feet so they didn't alert Buck, Theo and Willa frequently paused, crouching low to ensure they were not seen.

Although there weren't many trees, they didn't want to take the chance that Buck was staring out at them as they approached. It was a dangerous moment, trying to ensure they weren't being watched or hunted even as they came after Buck.

But by the time they reached the tree line, they could see well enough to know that Buck wasn't in the immediate vicinity. He had to be

farther in.

“There’s a river,” Willa whispered, nodding up ahead, where Theo saw past the brush to the thin stream of water broadening as it went along.

“I’m sure he’ll be somewhere along it. I just hope he’s still on this side. It’s probably a good deal wider ahead if this is the Holleran, like I think it is,” Theo said.

“I was thinking the same thing. It’s probably the Holleran, and that means Buck would have great access to water and fish here.

“He would be wise to hide out for a few days,” Willa said, still keeping her voice low.

Theo agreed and they started moving forward, ready to track Buck down and get him restrained.

But it only took a few moments before Willa placed a hand on Theo’s arm. He looked up and saw, much to his surprise, that Buck was right there.

His brother was just a few yards ahead, kneeling by the river for a drink.

Theo closed his eyes for a moment and let out a breath.

This was it. This was the moment he had been waiting for. He had no choice now but to approach Buck and bring an end to all of this.

No matter the cost.

## 37

Theo stepped forward at his full height with his hands on his hips. Buck turned and was on his feet in an instant.

“Calm down, Buck,” Theo said, holding his hands up defensively before dropping them to his sides.

Buck had seen that he wasn’t cocked and ready to shoot, but that didn’t mean Theo wouldn’t draw if he needed to.

Buck looked around, clearly defensive. Theo trusted that Willa had stayed behind, hidden, but ready.

He figured Buck knew she was close by, but if he couldn’t shoot at her right away, it would give them a chance for a little more time—a chance for Theo to get Buck to calm down, if such a thing was possible.

“I’m here to talk more than anything, Buck. You told me to come out behind the house at the lake. Things got messy. You shot me. But I’m here because I want to talk to you,” Theo said.

“Sorry about that, Theo. But you came to my hideout and you hunted me down. I needed you out of my way and I won’t hesitate to do the same right here, right now,” Buck said.

“That’s not necessary. I just want to figure all of this out. I wanted to talk, to remember old times and see if we could get back to that,” Theo said.

“You say you came just to talk, but I think you’re here to take me in. Tell me the truth. What are you really doing here?” Buck growled.

“I’m here to do the right thing and to ask you to do the same,” Theo explained. “I need you to step down. I need you to come to the sheriff with me and accept the fate that the law has for you.

“I know you don’t want to and I don’t blame you for it, but it’s time, Buck. You need to pay for your crimes and you know it.”

Buck scoffed and shook his head with bitterness in his eyes. Theo had never seen such hatred, especially not from his own family.

He couldn’t believe that Buck felt such venom toward him when all Theo had done was try to do the right thing. Wasn’t that what family did for each other?

Didn’t they fight to do the right thing? Didn’t they work hard to take care of one another?

Buck didn’t seem to think so. He was so full of anger that Theo could hardly stand to look at him. And now, for the first time ever, he really did start to believe that Buck was too far gone.

With all the moments he had spent trying to prepare himself for the fact that Buck might not be willing to do the right thing, he’d still had hope.

Now, Theo was starting to question that. He was starting to think that maybe Buck had been gone for a long time and he was never coming back.

“I need to pay for my crimes? Really? So you don’t think I’ve paid enough?” he asked.

Theo’s brows drew together, not understanding what Buck meant by that. Buck hadn’t served any kind of a sentence for what he had done. What did he want Theo to believe now?

What was he going to try and say to defend himself after all of this? It was unbelievable that Buck was attempting to play the victim when Theo had been the one to suffer back then—and so many others had suffered since.

“What are you talking about?” Theo asked.

“I’m talking about what I went through when we were young. I was just a child, Theo. I wasn’t a man. But suddenly, I was expected to be one,” Buck spat.

Theo had always imagined the pressure had been awful, but was that a good enough excuse for everything he’d done?

“Come on now, Buck. I wasn’t that hard for you. You didn’t give it more than a couple weeks of looking after me before you started in with the gang,” Theo said.

“It wasn’t just about you, Theo. You may have thought that, but it was so much more. I had to raise you and I had to keep the ranch afloat with no idea how to do that.

“Pa taught us how to do the chores and all, but I never had a head for business and you know it,” Buck said.

“That’s no excuse, Buck,” Theo retorted. “I tried as hard as I could to run the business of the ranch. Remember?

“As just a young boy, I was the one telling you what to do with the finances and how we could move forward. If we had worked together, if you’d been willing to give it a chance, we could have succeeded. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, maybe I didn’t want to be a rancher or a farmer or any of that,” Buck hissed.

“Maybe I wanted to be my own man and make my own mark on the world but everything was holding me back. Including my little

brother."

The insult landed, but Theo brushed it away, not willing to let Buck get under his skin. He knew Willa was listening to all of this, and that was the most embarrassing part.

Theo didn't think she would judge him, but it hurt to know that she was learning what Buck thought of him. It wasn't a flattering portrait his brother painted.

"I never meant to hold you back, but you didn't even try to move forward. You took the easy way out. The coward's way.

"You ought to be ashamed because you didn't even know how to stand up when it was easy. Of course you fell when it was hard," Theo said, wishing he hadn't been so harsh.

But Buck's hurt lasted only a moment before he started launching more excuses.

"You have no idea the kind of pressure I was under. I had to fill Pa's shoes. You know what that man was like.

"Even if you idealize him now, you gotta admit that he was hard on us at times, making all kinds of demands. Well, I found a way to make demands of my own, and it wasn't by staying there at the ranch and trying to look after you," he concluded.

Theo took a deep breath, trying not to be hurt by these words. Buck wasn't going to stop and Theo needed to prepare himself for that now, knowing if he took this too personally, he would only get himself into trouble.

He ought to have known that Buck had felt like he was a victim in all this. After all, he really had been but a boy, as well.

Sure, things had been rough, but at least no one had expected much of Theo. And yet, Buck had still made decisions that cost people their

lives, and that couldn't be excused. Could it?

"I had to make a life for myself," Buck continued, as if answering that very question. "I'm not ashamed of how I did it. I had no other choice at the time and it set me on a path.

"I did what I needed in order to get by and every life that was sacrificed along the way happened because I needed to take care of me before I worried about anyone else.

"That's just the way life is, Theo. Always has been. I don't mind admitting to it, but I sure won't be punished for it."

"There's still a chance for you to repent, Buck. You know that's not the right attitude to have about this. You know that you should feel regret for your actions.

"I'm sure that, deep down, you know you were in the wrong. But we can be a family again. I'm here, and I'm still your brother," Theo said.

Buck glared at Theo and shook his head, cold and distant.

"Theo, why would I bother repenting for a life I intend to continue? And what do you mean, we can be a family again?

"We're not a family. We're just two fellas who were born from the same woman once upon a time," he said, callously.

"We're brothers, Buck," Theo insisted.

"I don't believe in all that nonsense, Theo. That we have to stay close to our roots and all that? It means nothing. You and I are not close and we never will be.

"I don't know why you're still living in the past, but I'd thought you would have grown up by now. You always were the soft one in the family," he said, mockingly.

Theo straightened his spine and held himself tall and proud. He didn't consider himself soft, but when he thought about the differences between himself and Buck, Theo suddenly realized it was a compliment.

He would rather be a kind and gentle man than the kind of animal his brother had become. Theo never wanted to be like Buck. He would never let himself lose his soul like that.

It wasn't worth giving up every last thing that made him a person.

"You were always quick to trust people, Theo. You always wanted to see the good in them, even as you're doing right now. You think you can rescue me from a life of evil?

"I'm not evil, Theo. I'm a man trying to survive. But if you want to know whether or not you can find anything good in me, then no.

"I am exactly the man you see before you. And by expecting anything more, by thinking people might truly have good inside of them, you're only putting yourself in danger," Buck warned.

Theo gritted his teeth, not wanting to show emotion. He wasn't ashamed of it, but knew just how dangerous it really would be.

If Buck saw weakness, he would use the opportunity. If Theo let himself get too upset, he might make a mistake.

There were a dozen things that could go wrong if he gave in to the surge of sadness tugging on his heart.

No, there was no room for that just now.

Theo had to hold himself together, to keep his stance firm and his blood cold. Buck had already destroyed him in so many ways and Theo was not about to let him have one more victory.

"You stole away my ability to trust people, Buck," he said. "You think

I've been weak all these years because I was too trusting? Well, you're wrong.

"I have spent these past years hunting down men like you and bringing them to justice. I didn't trust a single one of them. I knew who they were. I know what you are."

"Oh? So I've ruined your ability to trust, have I? Then why have you even bothered to come out here and try to convince me to see your side of things?

"Do you really think that you can reach me? You think you can rekindle your trust in humanity if only I will turn from my wicked ways?" Buck asked, laughing arrogantly.

"I don't need you to," Theo said, simply.

"And why is that?"

"Because I'm out here thanks to Willa. She's the one who helped me see that I can trust people again. Not you. She did.

"I know how not to trust, but I also now know how to give people a second chance," Theo said.

Buck rolled his eyes at that, shaking his head in irritation at his brother's thoughtful words.

Theo was ready to speak again when, in a flash, Buck raised his gun and fired off two shots in quick succession.

The moment was a shock to Theo, but when a scream ripped through the air from behind him, he was torn back to reality.

He turned just in time to see Willa drop to the ground.

## 38

Willa fell to the earth with her right arm in searing pain. She didn't even realize the cry of agony had been her own until she was writhing on the ground.

She had been shot. But just before she'd felt the bullet plunge into her skin, she had seen the first one strike Theo. Even as Willa fell, Theo turned to watch her.

Had he even known he was shot? Had he been so distracted that he couldn't feel another bullet in his body with less than a day passing from the first?

He was there just a few feet away, not moving or showing any sign of life.

Willa couldn't see where he'd been shot. She knew it was somewhere on his left side because she had seen his body take the impact before she fell.

Desperate not to leave Theo on his own with another wound like this, Willa crawled over to him. He still wasn't moving and Willa whimpered as she made her way over, unable to stop herself from crying.

Her eyes filled with tears that would not stop falling down her cheeks as she pushed through the pain to reach him.

"Th-Theo. Theo," she said, repeating his name in desperation as she

tried to get his attention, to see if he was still alive. It hurt more than she could bear to feel the bullet in her arm, but the pain of not knowing Theo's fate was infinitely worse.

His eyes were closed, but that didn't mean anything, did it?

Looking closer at him, she saw that the bullet had struck him in his upper shoulder. Willa sighed in relief—he had probably just lost consciousness from the pain or the impact.

He couldn't be dead from that wound, could he?

"Theo?" she asked again, begging him to live.

There was a noise nearby and she knew it was Buck trying to move along. There was still a risk that he might come after her and kill her, but Willa wasn't concerned about Buck anymore.

She was only worried about Theo. What did it matter now if Buck came after her? Theo was injured. And if Theo didn't make it out of this alive, Willa saw no point in living.

She glanced at Buck, who was hurrying to get back up on his horse. He turned back to Willa and flashed a gloating smile, clearly proud of his ability to bring them both down like this.

It was a horrific moment, seeing the evil in Buck's eyes. He was a terrible man, a man who didn't care about the suffering of others.

A man who had been willing to murder his own brother without a care.

But Willa didn't let herself get distracted by Buck just then. She needed Theo to survive.

"Willa," Theo groaned, looking up at her. As his eyes flicked open, Willa thought her heart would burst. She had never been so relieved in all her life.

“Oh! You’re alive,” she cried, leaning close to him.

“He shot you,” Theo said.

“How did you even see that? He shot you first,” Willa said.

“I didn’t feel it,” Theo replied. “I didn’t feel anything except panic when I realized that he hit you. Where were you shot?”

“Just my arm. But it’s my right arm,” she answered. “And you were shot in the shoulder.”

Theo smiled at her, despite his pain.

“It’s all right. We’ll get through it. Willa, you can do this,” he said, closing his eyes for a moment against the pain before looking at her again with confidence.

“Do what? You need me to give you stitches again?” she asked with a laugh, trying to find humor despite the worry she felt for Theo.

If she could just tease him, just get him to laugh, she would know he was truly all right.

After the two shots he had suffered, she needed assurance that he would make it. How could a man withstand the kind of blood loss Theo was facing?

Yes, she had to make sure he stayed alive, even if it meant hoisting him upon his horse and dragging him into the nearest town to find a doctor.

Then again, Willa knew, she needed a doctor herself. She didn’t know yet whether or not the bullet was still inside her arm, but she needed to find out soon.

It would be impossible to survive if either of them got an infection.

“Willa, you have to hurry,” Theo said. “You have to do it with your left.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, frightened by the prospect.

“You know what I mean.”

She did. Despite the fact that she desperately didn’t want to, Willa knew what he was saying.

She looked up at Buck, who was just getting himself settled in the saddle, clearly not feeling threatened. After all, he believed Willa and Theo were both too far gone to fight back.

Willa tried to trust herself, to remember that she had done this before. Theo had taught her well. Without a right hand for shooting, she had no choice but to rely on the left.

It took a moment to prop herself up, to get straightened and steady her arm. She looked at Theo with hesitation.

“Are you sure you can’t do this? You still have an arm,” she said.

“But you’re already propped up. You can do it, Willa. Just give me a minute to try and rally myself, but this is on you,” Theo said.

She knew he was right. Theo was trying hard enough to sit up properly. He had two holes in his body and he was struggling to maintain his strength.

But Willa, despite her own pain, was able to focus. She was able to grit her teeth and hold herself high.

“I’m nervous,” she confessed.

“And Buck is about to ride away. This is our last chance, Willa. If you don’t take that shot, all of this was a waste. It was pointless.

“We will lose him—and this time, I’m sure we won’t ever manage to track him down again,” Theo warned.

Knowing he was right, Willa trained her eyes on the target. Buck paused only to check something in his pack and she had mere seconds to make her decision, to figure out what to do next.

But once she was ready, Willa took a deep breath and aimed. She didn’t know if she could make it, if she could do what needed to be done. Was it possible?

Would she really be able to hit him when she’d only had a small amount of training in how to shoot with her left hand?

Although Theo had been a good teacher, she just wasn’t sure if she could possibly succeed. And yet, she had no choice.

With that, Willa exhaled and pulled the trigger.

The sound was deafening, but Willa imagined it was her panic more than anything. But when she finally managed to see what had happened, Willa gasped.

Buck growled in anger and pain, grasping at his leg as he fell from his horse to the ground.

Willa couldn’t believe that she’d managed to hit him. Even if it was just a leg injury, it made all the difference. It meant she and Theo still had a chance—they could get through this.

Before she could ask Theo what to do next, he was already up, clutching his shoulder and somewhat crouched from his two injuries as he rushed over to Buck, who was groaning and reaching for his gun that was too far for him to grasp.

“Enough, Buck!” Theo shouted, kneeling down and pulling the handcuffs from his back with his good arm. Buck still had one hand on his injured leg, but tried to shoo Theo away with the other.

It was no use, however. Theo was terribly injured, but he at least had the determination to bring Buck in, and it made him stronger. He quickly shackled Buck's hands.

"I might need yours, as well," Theo called to her.

"My handcuffs?" she asked in surprise.

"I don't trust him with just one pair," Theo said with a laugh that quickly turned into a groan.

"Get away from me," Buck growled. But it was too late. His hands were already stuck and there was no way of escaping, even with just one set of handcuffs.

Willa made her way over, holding tightly to her right arm. She could see Theo's shoulder was bleeding profusely as well, but they were still in better shape than Buck.

At least they had each other to depend on as they made their effort to bring Buck in.

She was still caught in her disbelief as she reached them, looking down at the man she had injured by shooting with her left hand. And she had hit him exactly where she'd hoped.

Buck was still alive. That had been her goal, but she hadn't been able to bet on achieving it.

Willa had been afraid that she would have no choice other than to kill him. But here he was, lying there, ranting in his anger.

"What did you do to me?" Buck shouted at Willa.

He struggled to break free of his brother, but Theo had him firmly in place. There was no way to get out of Theo's grip and Buck finally had to accept that he was caught.

Willa didn't respond to his question, instead clenching her jaw and trying to make a plan for what they would do next and where they would go to get their wounds treated.

They needed to take Buck to the sheriff, but they also needed the three of them to get stitched up before they lost more blood or ended up with an infection.

Theo, it seemed, had his mind elsewhere. He looked at Willa with another one of his charming smiles.

"Nice shot," he said to her as he worked to pull Buck to standing.

"Thanks. I had a good teacher," she said, knowing it was the most obvious response. But Theo grinned anyway, accepting her compliment.

"I won't let you do this. You can't take me in. Let go of me!" Buck demanded, still trying to break free.

Willa could see that Theo was struggling to hold onto him, given that his left side now had two bullet holes in it, one in the abdomen and the other in the shoulder.

"Stop it," Theo ordered, but Buck wouldn't relent.

Knowing there was nothing more to do, Willa took hold of Buck with her left hand so she and Theo each had a good grip on him. It seemed the only way they could stop him from escaping.

"He just needs a bit of extra strength. Don't worry, he's not going anywhere," Willa said, flashing Theo a comforting smile.

Theo smiled at her in turn and Willa knew he felt the same surge of peace she did. They really had achieved this together and no one could stop them. Not Buck, not anyone.

They had fought with every last bit of strength and they had managed

to reach this moment, when they had met the goal that had brought them together to begin with.

If ever there had been a day when Willa believed she could achieve something this grand, it had not been this day. And yet, this was precisely when she had been meant to find Buck.

She was meant to find him with Theo. It was clear now, more than ever, that Theo had always been the man Willa was supposed to fall in love with.

And, whatever the cost, she would never let that love be lost.

## 39

Theo let out a breath of exhaustion and pain. He was bleeding badly from his shoulder and he shook his head in disbelief.

Just the afternoon before, he had been shot. Twice, in less than a full day's passing.

"This is a new record for me," he said with a laugh, looking up at Willa.

She looked at him with worry in her eyes and he knew she was about to give him a warning of some kind.

"I'm relieved that you're able to make jokes and all, but you need to save your strength. We still have a long ride to make it back to town.

"You know as well as I do that this isn't going to be easy just yet," she said.

He was well aware of that, but figured it was better to try and remain lighthearted than to worry her further. Still, Theo was touched by Willa's concern for him.

He'd never thought he would feel that again. He hadn't been comforted by anyone since childhood, when his mother and father were always there for him if he was hurt or sad.

But now, he had Willa. And even if Buck never wanted to be his family and didn't care about Theo as his brother, it didn't matter.

Theo had found Willa, and she was his new family. She was the one who had opened his eyes once again to the world of care and trust and unity.

“I think the next town is about an hour of riding. According to the map, it’s a pretty straight shot on flat land, so we have that, at least,” Willa said.

“I’m glad to hear it. I don’t think I could handle any extra bumps along the way,” Theo said, trying to fight off the dizziness he felt.

“Here,” Willa said, cutting yet another piece of her skirt to wrap around his shoulder.

“You need a bandage, too,” he said.

“I sure do, but you already lost a lot of blood yesterday. Let’s focus on getting you taken care of and then I’ll try to get something around my arm,” she said.

“Willa, it’s going to take us both. We’re each out an arm,” Theo said.

Together, they got his shoulder wrapped, with Willa using her left arm to drape the cloth as he held in place with his right hand. He then wrapped Willa’s arm while she did the same.

It was a chance for them to truly work together once more—only this time, they were helping one another heal.

“All right, that seems to be about as good as it’s going to get. What do you say? Are you ready to head out?” Theo asked.

“More than anything,” Willa sighed with a laugh. It was clear she was desperate to finish things and not have to worry any longer about their circumstances.

Theo couldn’t blame her. He felt quite the same way, eager to get his brother to the sheriff and to have all their wounds tended to.

Through the exhaustion and injuries, they needed to get back to town quickly. Buck was hauled up onto his horse, his feet tied and hands still bound.

They made sure he was secure on the saddle and wouldn't fall off or escape. They then tied his horse to Theo's and started back out for the nearest town.

The ride was excruciatingly painful, with Buck making threats and using cruel words against Theo. But Theo blocked it all out, even when Buck mocked him for thinking they were family, when he told Theo that he would regret this one day.

"Just ignore him," Willa advised, obviously angry on Theo's behalf.

"I'm doing my best. I know he won't stop and it would be pointless to try and argue with him or get him to see any reason. It's all right.

"We'll make it to town soon enough and I'm sure that once we're there, we will not only get Buck taken care of, but we will also get our bounty and actually manage to pay the doctor for whatever he needs to do," Theo said, still trying to keep the mood light.

In his heart, he was almost dismayed by the bounty. While he knew Buck was right, that they weren't really family in a way that mattered, he felt awful to consider that he was going to make any money off sending his own brother to jail.

"This isn't over!" Buck shouted after a period of silence.

Theo calmed himself, breathing steadily and trying not to get worked up no matter how hard Buck was trying to upset him.

"Are you going to make it all the way with that racket? We can tie him to my horse, you know. You can ride ahead and get some help and have the doctor and sheriff ready for us," Willa suggested.

"No, Willa. We ride together," Theo insisted.

He looked at her and smiled as Buck continued with his threats. Willa smiled back and Theo knew that she was moved by his decision. But there was really no other choice.

The idea of leaving Willa behind to deal with Buck was impossible. They had to go slowly for the sake of their pain, but it didn't mean they should separate just so one could get into town faster.

In the end, they had to ride for only an hour before they saw a town, just like the map had shown. And when they arrived, the people of the town looked at them with gasps and immediately offered to help get them to the doctor.

"Thank you," Theo said. "And if someone can send for the sheriff, please let him know we have Wild Buck in tow. He needs the doctor as well, but after that, I have a feeling the sheriff is going to want to book him."

"I'll get him. He's my brother-in-law and he will be thrilled to be the one to take in Wild Buck," one of the men said.

"Thank you kindly." Theo was hopeful that they were about to be finished with all of this.

Now that they were in town, he was sure that Buck wouldn't get away. This was over.

They only needed to finish cleaning up after the battle, and then he could look toward the future and what that meant for him and Willa.

The man who had volunteered to get the sheriff scampered off excitedly while another led them to the doctor. A man came rushing out of the little wooden building.

It seemed someone had come ahead to let him know there were gunshot wounds to be seen to.

"Come in! Come in!" he urged, leading them inside.

The doctor helped Willa dismount first, and then Theo. Buck, they saved for last, with the help of a couple other men so that Willa and Theo didn't have to get him down.

"It's amazing that the two of you got him bound up with those wounds of yours," the doctor said.

"Well, we were quite motivated. We wanted to get him brought in as soon as possible and that gave us some extra strength," Theo said.

"I'm sure it did," he replied.

"Anyway, I'll let you tend to Willa first," Theo said.

"No!" Willa insisted. "Doctor, please. You must look at Theo. He has two wounds and one is from yesterday afternoon. I had to do the stitches and I want you to make sure it's not infected."

The doctor held his hands up to calm them down.

"You needn't worry, little lady. We may be small, but I do have a medical assistant and he will be more than happy to help out. He's my son, so I think he's quite good," he said with a laugh.

Willa sighed with relief and Theo was glad to see her fears put to rest. It seemed Buck would still have to wait, but for the first time, Theo didn't feel bad about that. Willa was his priority.

Just then, the sheriff came in and spoke with the doctor to make sure he could take Buck to the jail once his wounds had been tended to.

The doctors got to work at once, letting Willa and Theo each lay on a table to have their injuries examined and for the doctors to see how bad the damage was.

"Woo-hee, this is not looking good. It's not infected, but it could easily be if we don't get this cleaned out and dressed properly," the doctor said, looking at the wound in Theo's side that Willa had stitched up

for him.

“Is he going to be all right?” she asked with concern.

“He will be just fine,” the doctor assured her.

His son, who was working on Willa, nodded in agreement.

“As will you. It looks like the bullet went straight through,” he said.

“This one didn’t,” the older doctor said, grimly.

Theo groaned as the doctor poked and prodded around the wound in his shoulder. It was exceedingly painful, possibly even worse than the one at his side.

He felt nauseous from the pain and the realization that he was still bleeding quite badly.

“It’s going to be all right, son. I’ll take good care of you, but we’re going to need to get that bullet out. It takes precedence over the wound in your side right now, so I just need you to hold on.

“Let me see what I can give you for the pain,” the doctor said.

Theo took a deep breath, wondering what was going to come of this. He didn’t want to have anything digging around in his shoulder to pull out the bullet, but there was little choice.

As he lay there, struggling while the doctor gave him some kind of a harsh liquid for the pain, Willa reached out and took his hand. He smiled, relieved that her left hand and his right had both been uninjured so they could comfort one another in that moment.

When he looked over at her, she was the best thing he could have had to numb the pain.

“You’re going to be all right,” she said, sweetly.

“Yes. We both are. You and I will get through this as we have gotten through everything else,” Theo promised.

They were quiet for a moment, staring into one another’s eyes, when Theo felt the sharp twinge of pain and pressure in his shoulder. He shut his eyes tightly and moaned.

“I thought you gave him something for the pain,” Willa said with worry.

The doctor replied grimly and Theo could hear the frown in his voice. “I did, little lady. Believe it or not, that is the level of pain he feels after having help.

“That’s why we have to give him something, at least,” he said.

The pressure eased and Theo opened his eyes just in time to hear the little chink of metal drop into a dish.

“And the bullet is out. You’re bleeding a lot, but I’ll be able to get it stopped and we can clean both your wounds and get you all stitched up,” the doctor said.

“Thank you,” Theo said, feeling woozy.

He looked back at Willa as the younger doctor stitched her up. She winced, despite also having had something for the pain.

“You all right?” Theo asked, squeezing her hand.

“I’ll be fine,” she said.

“You two sure are concerned for each other,” the older doctor noted.

“That we are,” Theo replied with a smile.

“And what’s your relation? Siblings? Spouses?”

Theo paused and took a deep breath, turning his head back to Willa.

“Well, Doctor, we are going to be wed tomorrow. Aren’t we, Willa?”

Immediately, tears of joy filled Willa’s eyes once more. She nodded and bit her lip before replying.

“Yes, Theo. Yes, we are.”

## Epilogue

The sun began to sink below the horizon. Looking up, Theo admired the striking colors in the sky, all hues of pink and orange and yellow.

With all of his travels and all the nights he had been out late, looking at the beauty of the world, this was still his favorite view.

Evening after evening, he would watch it happen, watch how magnificent it was. He never got sick of it. He never felt the urge to up and go, to take off and wander once more.

Theo put the hoe to the ground, wanting to finish this last little project on the homestead before dinner. It was a big day, but he still needed to get work done.

Just as he completed his task, Theo heard the bell at the front door ring and knew Willa was coming out to get him. He turned and saw her bright, beautiful smile.

“Come on in, Theo. Everyone is almost here,” she said.

Theo looked up and saw that she was right. Horses and buckboards were headed their way and he needed to go wash his hands and change his clothes from a day of work.

He rushed to get himself cleaned up and was changing his clothes in the bedroom when he heard Willa greeting everyone. Feeling like a terrible host, he quickly finished buttoning his shirt and raced out to

see everyone crowded in the kitchen.

“There he is!” Don said with enthusiasm, greeting Theo along with the others. Theo smiled, amazed at his fortune to have so many wonderful friends.

Never before in his life had he been this close to people. It was such a wonder to actually have a community and know that people cared about him and wanted to be his friend.

He glanced over to Willa, who was beaming with pride at how well he got along with everyone. As soon as he had a chance, Theo slipped over to her and kissed his wife on the cheek.

“Well, everyone, let’s go take a seat and fill our plates and our bellies, what do you say?” Willa asked.

She was met with cheers of agreement and excitement as the fifteen guests took their seats and started piling their plates with food.

Although it was crowded in the relatively small home, it was happy. That was something Theo could never quite push past—to know that he was happy, despite staying in one place and never going elsewhere.

Despite being at home and working the soil instead of being out finding criminals, he was happy.

Willa had grown into such a homemaker that Theo could hardly believe it. Even in the earliest days of their marriage, he expected her to struggle with being a housewife instead of an adventurer.

But she’d soon settled into the role with ease and Theo had started to wonder if she’d only pursued her job because she was good at it and had no other opportunities.

Maybe this was what she had always wanted. Maybe it was the thing she was meant for.

With everyone ready, Theo knew it was his duty to say something before they began eating. He stood and raised his glass.

“A toast! Today, as we celebrate Christmas with friends and family, I want to thank all of you for being such good friends to my wife and me, and for welcoming us when we were strangers to this community.

“Although Willa and I never imagined that this would be the life we wanted, we now know that it is the life we love. We are thankful to all of you who have helped to make this possible,” he said.

Willa looked at him with those striking eyes of hers and Theo fought against a wave of emotion, not wanting to get choked up as he gave the toast in front of all their friends.

“A lot of things happened to bring us here, but here we are, nonetheless. We wish you all a merry Christmas and happy feasting!”

Everyone clinked their glasses together and drank before diving into the food. As usual, it was wonderful. Willa’s cooking was even better now than it had been before.

Of course, now she was no longer dependent upon food that was adequate for traveling. That had certainly given her the chance to do more and learn to cook new things.

Not only that, but they were able to largely eat off their homestead. With a large garden, chickens for eggs and for meat, two dairy cows, a bull, and four goats, they found themselves always able to provide for their needs and also to help others.

Mr. Miller gave them wheat from his farm in exchange for milk from their cows. Mrs. Whiting spun the loveliest wool that she would offer, and they provided her with corn in the summers and cabbage in the winters.

The community took care of one another and Theo and Willa were highly involved.

“So, you were a bounty hunter?” Don asked in astonishment as he passed Theo the mashed potatoes.

“I sure was,” he replied.

“What was that like?”

Theo glanced at Willa, who smiled sadly. She knew Theo still grieved how things had ended, even though it had been the right thing and he wouldn’t have changed his decision for all the world.

“It was a tough job. Always moving along without stopping. I never had a home, but I always had a wound or two,” he said with a laugh.

“I can’t imagine. When you all came here, I just assumed you were coming from another town, but Mr. Miller told me yesterday that you used to be a bounty hunter.

“I said, ‘Him? No chance!’ But here you are, confirming it,” Don said.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s true. I spent most of my life doing it, in fact. I started when I was around sixteen, helping out sheriffs here and there. By eighteen, I was on my own,” he said.

“And how does a man like you decide to settle down and become a homesteader?” Don asked.

Once more, Theo looked at Willa, but this time, he did so with a joyful smile.

“Well, that happened because of my wife. She’s the one I credit for my ability to start something new and different,” he said.

“Isn’t that how it always goes?” Don asked with a laugh.

“Sure is,” he confirmed.

“Well, what about you, Willa? What did you do before meeting Theo?

Did he come across you in some town where he took the bad guy to jail?" Mr. Dawson asked.

Willa laughed and shook her head.

"Not exactly," she said. "If you're surprised that Theo was a bounty hunter, I imagine you will be doubly shocked to learn that I, too, was a bounty hunter."

At that, silence descended around the table. Mrs. Hancock gasped and her husband leaned in close, wide-eyed as everyone else.

"Indeed, I spent most of my life hunting outlaws, as well. Like Theo, I was on my own from a young age and I found myself looking for a place in the world. I had a vendetta, I suppose.

"I lost my whole family because of some fellas who came for us. My ma and pa owned a general store, and I guess that made us targets.

"The men started a fire while I was chasing them outside with a gun," Willa said.

She left the story there, but Theo was still proud that she had learned to share some of her past. He knew how challenging it was for her, how heartbroken she was any time she had to think back to it.

But she had learned to discuss it without falling apart, and Theo found her strength to be amazing.

"Anyway, I spent years as a bounty hunter before one particularly tricky case landed me working with a handsome fella who was less than friendly," she teased.

Theo blushed and scratched the back of his neck while nodding his confession.

"That's true," he admitted.

“Theo? You weren’t friendly?” Don asked.

“Not in the least. A lot of that was to do with the fact that this particular outlaw was very important to me,” he said.

“How so?” Mr. Hancock asked.

“Well, the reason I was on my own so young was because my parents passed away, leaving me in the hands of my older brother. But it wasn’t long before he joined a gang of thieves and… well, he became quite a terror across the west.

“I wanted to hunt him down and take him to the sheriff before Willa had a chance. I knew she wouldn’t show him any mercy, so I tried to get to him first.

“Turns out, we had different leads that led us to the same place,” he said, trying to be as open as his wife had been.

“I lied to her at first, not wanting her to know that he was my brother. But she found out. We worked together and managed to get him to the sheriff,” he finished.

“And then you got married?” Simon Woodland asked, his jaw slackened with shock.

“Sure did,” Theo grinned.

There were hundreds of questions after that, with all their friends wanting to know more about what had taken place. But Theo didn’t mind talking about it anymore, and Willa was perfectly open, as well.

Now that they had these people in their lives, they were going to ensure they were never alone, and that they had more than just friends, but a family and a community.

It was the first time Theo had felt himself able to really trust others again. Willa had opened the door and that was something so new for

him.

He thought about that Christmas a couple years ago, when he had wandered in a town without anyone. He hadn't had a family or friends or anybody with whom he could share his life.

He had been completely alone.

But now, things were different. He had his wife by his side and he truly felt that he was at home.

Willa, seated on the other side of him, fielded some of the questions so they weren't each having to divulge everything on their own. When Theo looked at her, telling stories relating to each comment that was made, he was astonished that he had been so lucky to marry this woman.

She had changed his life, truly. There was no one in the world quite like Willa, and Theo wasn't sure he would ever have been at peace without her.

He often wondered what would have happened with Buck if Willa hadn't come along. Would he have been strong enough to handle his brother? Would he have managed to do the right thing? Or would Theo have let Buck get away?

Most likely, Theo would have been killed in the exchange. And although he felt bad that his brother was still in jail and would be for the rest of his life, Theo could still be happy knowing that he had done the best he could.

He took Willa's hand and gave it a squeeze. She looked back at him and smiled, biting her lip.

Theo leaned forward and gave her a quick peck on the cheek, not wanting to be inappropriate in front of their friends but unable to stop himself from this one small sign of affection.

“You two were made for each other,” Eliza Miller said, sighing gently.

The young woman was still hoping for love and Theo was glad he and Willa could be an example of romance in its simplest form.

“Yes, we were,” Willa said.

And Theo agreed. He had found the woman he belonged with, and Willa was the one who had made his happiness possible.

**Extended Epilogue**

Willa tucked Leah and Mary into bed. Beside her, Theo opened the book he was reading to them, a sweet child’s bedtime story.

“So then, the bear stood up on his hind legs and said, ‘I’m going to eat you if you don’t leave the honey alone!’ But the little girl insisted that she wanted the honey,” he read.

“Oh no! Is the bear going to eat her, Papa?” Mary asked in her high-pitched little voice.

At just four years of age, she was already so bright and inquisitive. Both girls loved to ask questions, but Mary was the more vocal of the two.

“You just have to wait and see. What do you think, Leah? Is the bear going to eat the little girl?” Theo asked.

“I hope not. It’s so sad when little girls are eaten by bears,” Leah replied.

Willa and Theo laughed at her response and Willa shook her head.

“Darling, when have you ever heard of a bear eating a little girl? Is that something that happens often around here?” she asked.

“No, Mama, but it would still be really sad,” Leah replied.

“Yes, I suppose it would. Thankfully, we don’t have to worry about that very often,” she said.

“Yes, it would be very upsetting if Mary got eaten by a bear,” Leah said.

Once more, Willa started laughing.

“That will never happen, darling. We don’t have many bears in these parts. You and your sister are perfectly safe,” she said.

“Is the story too scary? I don’t have to read any more of it,” Theo said.

“No, Papa, we want to hear the rest!” the girls protested.

“Are you sure?” Theo asked.

“Yes, Papa, please,” Leah insisted.

“Please, Papa!” Mary added.

“Very well,” he said. “So, while the little girl ate the honey, the bear started coming closer and closer. She heard him, but she was not afraid.

“And as the bear drew near, he started to get angry. Why wasn’t she afraid? Didn’t she know that bears were scary?

“The bear asked the little girl, ‘Why aren’t you frightened?’ And the little girl answered, ‘Because I am finished. There is still a lot of honey left. Didn’t you know there would be enough to share?

“‘And wouldn’t you rather have food that is here, ready for you, or food that you have to chase?’ The bear thought about that for a moment and realized she was right,” Theo read.

“He could either chase after the little girl and try to catch her for food, or he could share the honey and be happy that she was so generous.

“So, he sat down beside her and started to eat,” he continued.

“Wouldn’t he want something more than honey? Did she at least give him some bread to put it on?” Leah asked.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart. She didn’t know she would find the honey,” Theo explained.

“Can I have some honey and bread?” Mary asked.

“It’s bedtime, my darling,” Willa reminded her.

Mary pouted but all she needed was a kiss on the forehead to make it better.

“I think that’s enough for tonight, loves. Get some rest and we can finish the story tomorrow,” Theo said.

Despite their daughters’ protests, Theo and Willa agreed that it was time to go to sleep. They said goodnight, kissed the girls on the forehead once more, and left the room, quietly closing the door behind them.

“Excellent story,” Willa whispered with a grin, still in awe of their daughters and their purity and sweetness.

“Thank you, my love. What do you say? Would you like a snack of bread and honey?” Theo asked, teasingly.

Willa laughed and followed him to the bedroom, where they laid down to rest. She sighed in relief as her body settled into the comfort of the bed.

It had been a long, wonderful day, full of playing with the girls and tending to the land.

There were always chores to be done around the homestead, but she didn’t mind. Leah was old enough to help with the milking in the

mornings and she was teaching Mary, as well.

In the garden, likewise, Leah was helping and Mary was given small tasks that wouldn't be too difficult or risky for her.

Willa loved bringing in harvests and preparing lovely meals for the family, full of color and life. It was a dream to have this land that was their very own and to no longer have to rely on whatever meat she could find at the general store or hardtack she made while traveling along.

While she still ate a lot of berries, Willa was able to add them to full meals rather than relying on them for quick energy as she rushed after an outlaw.

It was an entirely different experience, now that she could sit at the table with Theo and her daughters and truly enjoy the time they had together. They would laugh and discuss the day, make plans for tomorrow, and generally talk about life.

There were, however, always other things to do, and Willa was busier now than ever. While Theo continued to put all his effort into the homestead, Willa had started a new project that she rather enjoyed.

"The sheriff asked me to come in tomorrow," she said. "Are you all right bringing the girls out to work with you in the garden?"

"I'd be happy to. I'll have to keep Mary busy so she doesn't accidentally prune the tomatoes too much again," he said with a laugh.

"She's good at deadheading the flowers. It'll keep her busy for a while," Willa suggested.

"Good idea," he agreed. "So, what's the sheriff got you doing this time?"

"I need to do a bit of investigating on a gang that's been operating

near here and he thinks they're coming closer. There's a fella in town who might know one of the gang members and I think he'd be willing to talk to me about them so I can give the sheriff some ideas of hideouts," she said.

"What gang is it? And how close are they to us?" Theo asked, worry edging his tone.

"You know that Wilder Crew?"

"Oh, of course," he said. "It's good you'll be helping him; I don't want them near these parts.

"I had no idea they were getting closer to us and I'm glad he's being proactive to get rid of them before they cause any more trouble."

"Well, they already aren't far. This is important just to make sure we catch them so they don't do any more damage," she said.

"You're going to be safe?" Theo asked, his face taking on a pale hue. Willa felt his heartbeat quicken with the question.

"Of course. It's not a dangerous role and you know I'm always careful," Willa said.

Theo had been so supportive of her decision to do this work and, although she wasn't going out and catching the outlaws herself, she did the work with pride.

It felt good to continue contributing to the capture of those men who were hurting families and destroying towns. She would do it for as long as she could.

Theo had given her his full blessing when the sheriff came around asking if either of them had some extra time to help.

At first, Willa had assumed only Theo would be considered for the role, but when Theo explained how busy he was with the homestead,

the sheriff simply shrugged and said he didn't mind who was able to help, just as long as he could get some assistance from one of them.

Willa had been so excited by the opportunity and was thrilled to be a help to her community and others. No one doubted her abilities any longer—she had more than proven herself.

No one else would have to suffer and die the way her family had, and no one had to go through the awful trauma of being the only survivor so long as Willa had anything to say about it.

All of that, without the risk of bounty hunting? She couldn't have been happier, knowing she would always come home to her daughters and husband at the end of the day.

Willa rested her head on Theo's chest and he wrapped his arms around her.

It was the same way they had done it all those years ago when they slept in that bed at the inn, the one far too small for two people who weren't married and who were both unaccustomed to sharing a bed with anyone, anyway.

But it was a long time ago, and things had changed dramatically since those times. Now, they were in their own home, with their own children. They were a family and they were happy.

"Do you ever think back to those days when we first met? Do you remember the first nights we laid next to each other, both terrified because we knew we couldn't help bumping one another?" she asked with a laugh.

"Oh, I remember. I think about those days all the time. And right now, holding you like this, it only makes me miss them and also long for every night we have in the future," Theo said.

"Me too. Sometimes I wonder where we will be ten years from now, and other times I think it's foolish to look to the future when I'm so

happy in the present," she said.

"We really have come a long way. When I look at our little girls and think that we had Leah a full six years ago, I start to wonder how the time went by so fast.

"Can you believe that next month is going to be our ninth year of marriage?" he asked in astonishment.

"I know. It's shockingly wonderful. I still feel like the young woman I was back then, but when I think about the hard heart I had, I am grateful that I'm not her anymore," Willa confessed.

"Well, you are still just as beautiful as you always were," Theo replied.

"Hush," she said, looking at him with a grin. "I have the lines of evidence that I've carried two children. I have the wrinkles from laughter around my eyes and mouth.

"I have gray hairs that prove my life was not always easy. But whatever beauty I have lost, I have gained so much joy."

Theo shook his head and looked at her seriously.

"You haven't lost any beauty, Willa. Not only do you see those things as far worse than they are, but I think they have only made you more beautiful.

"They show the life we've lived together, and that's a pretty remarkable thing. You and I never had easy lives before, but since finding one another, things changed.

"So now, why would I look at the signs of those things and see them as anything less than beautiful?" he asked.

Willa leaned into him once more. He couldn't have said anything sweeter.

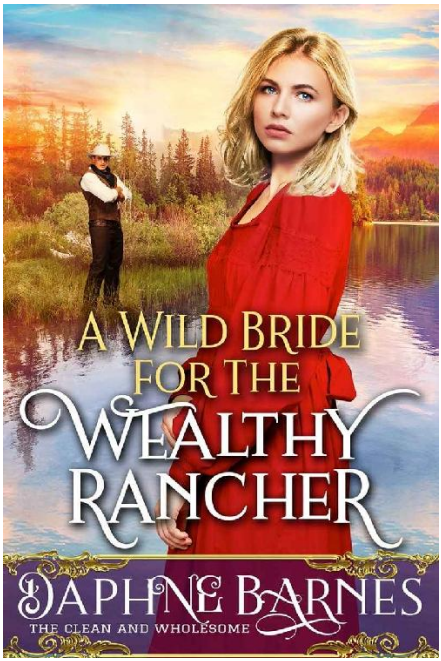
She was so blessed to have a husband like Theo and still wondered how it had ever come to be this way when her life had started out with so much sadness.

Her eyes were starting to feel heavy, but Theo's lips woke her from the half-sleep she had drifted into. It was just a sweet, simple kiss before he buried his head against the pillow, but it was enough to wake Willa's mind for just a moment longer.

She thought about this bliss of lying there with him, of feeling his gentle breath. And she thought about the happy children in the room beside them. There, on their homestead, they had a future.

And the future was brighter than she'd ever imagined.

# A Wild Bride For The Wealthy Rancher



## Chapter 1

*Spring, 1878*

As soon as she opened her eyes, Lottie Pelletier tried not to groan at the early hour.

The rooster was crowing, announcing to the world that the sun would soon be rising. She allowed herself a few minutes to fully wake up before leaving her warm bed.

After slipping on a faded dress, she went into the kitchen and got the fire going in the wood stove, hoping her father would be getting up soon and would start some coffee.

She quickly brushed her long blond hair and braided it so that it hung down her back. Lottie hesitated for a moment before grabbing her sister's heavy winter coat and heading outside.

It was early March in Maine and she was glad for the coat's warmth, especially since her own wrap was growing thin and worn. She tried not to think of the reason why her sister no longer wore the coat as she fashioned the large buttons in an effort to keep out the cold wind.

She began the morning chores almost by rote, something she had done every morning since she was a young girl. Seeds were scattered on the ground for the chickens to peck at while she gathered the eggs.

After setting the full basket on the porch, Lottie gave the pigs their

breakfast, then went inside the barn to milk the cow. While she worked, she tried to keep her mind off the reason why she was doing all of this alone.

Just a month ago, her mother and younger sister had gone to work at the textile factory located in the nearby city of Aston. Lottie had also worked there, but she hadn't gone to the factory that day because she hadn't been feeling well.

Only a few hours later, she and her father had heard the terrible news.

There had been an explosion in the factory, which had started a large fire inside the rundown building. More than fifty people had died, including her mother and sister.

The fire had shut the entire factory down.

Now Lottie was alone in the world, except for her father, of course. But because of his intense grief, she might as well be on her own.

Before the accident, she and her younger sister, Ellen, had taken care of the morning chores before they went to work. Lottie desperately missed this time she'd had with Ellen and had many fond memories of laughing and joking together with her sister as they took care of the chores.

When they finished, they would go into the house and eat a filling breakfast their mother would prepare. Then, the three of them would walk into Aston to the factory while her father worked on the farm.

It had been the best part of her days.

As she milked the cow, Lottie felt moisture on her face and realized she was crying. Angrily, she wiped the tears away.

Crying wouldn't bring back her mother and sister, and it definitely wouldn't change her circumstances.

While she was grateful she was alive, especially since she knew she most likely would have also died if she had gone to work on that fateful day, she hated how much her life had changed.

When the milk pail was full, Lottie set it aside and began to clean out the stalls in the barn. As she worked, the sun began to rise and she grew warm in the coat, but she was reluctant to take it off.

Wearing it made her feel close to Ellen.

Finally done with the chores, Lottie went inside to start breakfast, carrying in the milk and eggs. She was glad to see her father sitting at the kitchen table, but she could also immediately tell that this day wasn't going to be good for him.

Many days, he barely even acknowledged that she was around. On other days, he got up when she did and worked hard around the farm until the sun set and he could no longer see.

Now, he hardly glanced at her as she walked into the kitchen, only grunting when she greeted him.

But he had started the coffee, though, and Lottie gratefully poured herself a cup. She took a sip of the hot brew and set it aside so she could mix up some batter for pancakes.

"The chores are done," she said in the silence, trying to get her father to talk to her.

She tried not to sigh when he didn't respond. Anger filled her and she did her best to shove it down.

Her father was mourning for his wife and daughter. Lottie was doing the same. But she sometimes wanted to shake him, just to get a reaction.

Yes, her mother and sister were both gone, but she was still alive. Didn't she matter to him anymore?

But she also knew from experience that if she tried to demand her father's attention, he would only push her way. Not wanting to be rejected one more time, she focused her energy on breakfast.

While they ate, her father did start talking. He had a long list of things he wanted to get done around the farm that day.

Lottie tried to pay attention, but she was thinking about what she should do with her time.

The farm had been in their family since the beginning of the century, passed down from father to son. In the past, it had been a successful farm—they had raised enough cattle, pigs, and chickens to support themselves, as well as sell their surplus to their neighbors.

Her mother had also planted a large vegetable garden, and they sold anything they didn't use. Her father planted a few fields of alfalfa for hay, which he also sold.

Over the last few years, however, the amount of rain they received each year had dwindled, and now the farm wasn't making as much money as it used to.

Because of this, Lottie, along with Ellen and her mother, had agreed to work in the factory, just until things could turn around on the farm—although she had often wondered if it was really worth it.

Even between the three of them, they hadn't made much money, especially for the hours they had been forced to work. But every penny helped.

"What are your plans for the day?" her father asked, breaking through her thoughts.

Lottie turned her attention to her father and studied him for a moment. She hoped he would be willing to let her help more on the farm, but maybe she should try to find another job to bring in an additional income.

She could work during the day and still help with the chores in the early morning and evenings. Maybe if she could begin to make money again, he wouldn't worry so much about their finances.

"I was thinking of going into Aston to see if I could find a job," she commented, watching her father's face carefully.

She saw his relief before he quickly wiped it away and she knew he was glad she intended to find work. He didn't want her helping him in any other way.

"Try to find something that's close to the farm so that you can walk," he advised her. "But I think it's a good idea."

After cleaning up breakfast and doing the dishes, Lottie put on her best dress and began the long walk to Aston. Their farm was located about an hour's walk from the city.

Aston was close to the border between Maine and New Hampshire. It was a small city, but it was growing and new businesses seemed to open up almost monthly.

Lottie would try to find some work, but part of her hoped there wasn't anything available. Maybe then she could do what she loved and work on the farm.

Her father couldn't stop her from helping if she couldn't find other work, could he?

She loved being outdoors and working the land, inhaling the fresh smell of alfalfa and taking care of the animals. The vegetable garden needed to be prepared for planting, something her mother would have already started by now.

Lottie was aware her father had always been disappointed that he'd never had a son, although he had never said as much—and especially not to her.

She'd had a few conversations with him in the past, hoping he would go ahead and let her inherit the land even though she wasn't a male, but that was something he would never even consider.

In his mind, farming was a man's job to work on the farm, not a woman's.

When she arrived in the city, Lottie stopped in front of the first likely business that might consider hiring her: a small general store.

She would start here, and if they weren't hiring, she would just continue down the street. There had to be at least one business that would be looking for someone.

Stepping inside the general store, she could immediately tell they needed some help.

The shelves were fully stocked, but they were dusty, and a bunch of crates had been stacked against a wall, ready to be emptied. The floor also looked like it needed a good cleaning.

"Can I help you?"

Lottie turned around and put on her best smile for the owner, Mr. Hansen. Her family always shopped at this store unless they needed supplies he didn't offer. She hoped this would make a difference in him deciding to offer her a job.

"Yes. I'm wondering if you're looking for some help in your store."

"Help with what?" Mr. Hansen asked, looking confused.

She gestured around the store. "I'm a hard worker. I could sweep, keep the shelves stocked and clean, and..."

She stopped talking when Mr. Hansen began to shake his head. "I'm not looking to hire anyone. I take care of this store just fine on my own.

“Now, if you’re here to purchase something, let me know. Otherwise, move on.”

Lottie wanted to try to convince him that she could help and make a difference, but she could tell by his clenched jaw that she wasn't going to be able to change his mind. Instead, she sighed and left.

The next business was a café a few buildings away from the general store. There was actually a “help wanted” sign in the window, but the owner wasn’t interested in hiring her.

She knew he wasn’t against hiring women since there were two already working, but she did get a glimpse as to why he had turned her away.

He had looked her over from head to foot, disgust written across his face. He hadn’t wanted her because she wore a simple, faded farm dress, letting him know she was from a poor family.

Over the next few hours, Lottie experienced almost the exact same reaction from everyone. No one was looking for extra help, or if they were, they wanted someone different than her.

Some business owners even mocked her, saying that they would never hire a woman over a man. A few people were sympathetic to her plight, though, especially when she brought up the subject of the burned-down factory and why she was looking for work.

“That was an awful thing that happened,” Mrs. Lacey, who owned a dress shop, said with a sorrowful shake of her head. “A lot of people were killed and it put many others out of work.

“It's too bad you didn't come by last week. My best seamstress quit on me and I had to hire two women to replace her.”

When Lottie left the dress shop, even though she was willing to do anything to get a job, she was almost glad Mrs. Lacey couldn’t hire her.

The idea of sitting and sewing all day would have driven her crazy. Even at the factory, she was constantly moving.

By midafternoon, she had approached at least ten different businesses with no luck in finding a job, and she needed to head home so she could start dinner for her father.

As she walked back to her house, she felt hot and grubby even though there was a cool breeze. She was glad to get out of the hot sun and into the cool farmhouse.

Judging from the position of the sun, her father would be coming in for dinner soon.

She quickly began to reheat some stew that she had made the day before and then she did some house chores that needed to be done while it cooked. When her father arrived, she filled a bowl for him and added two thick slices of bread before preparing her own food.

“Any luck in finding a job?” her father asked curiously and with a hopeful expression.

Lottie shook her head.

“I guess I should have gone into Aston last week. The closing of the factory put a lot of people out of work and most of the businesses who were hiring have already taken on new employees.”

She glanced at him and tried to look confident. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep looking. I’m sure I’ll be able to find something sooner or later.”

“That's too bad. I’ve been thinking about your plight all day and do have an idea of what you could do,” her father answered. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this option before now.”

Lottie looked at him with interest, hoping that he was going to tell her that he had changed his mind and let her help around the farm.

Between the two of them, she was sure they could get the farm going again and be profitable. She actually had a few ideas of her own that could help.

She was a hard-working woman, the type of person that would be able to survive in any type of environment that the universe placed her in —as long as she was given a chance.

“You should get married.”

Lottie stared at her father for a moment, certain that she had heard him wrong. Even though she was already twenty-two years old, he had never made such a suggestion before.

Most of the girls she had gone to school with were already married, and a few of them already had a child or two of their own.

But he had always told her and Ellen that they had a home with their parents as long as they needed one. What had changed his mind that Lottie needed to marry now?

He ate a large spoonful of stew and it almost seemed he was doing his best to avoid looking at her.

“What did you say?” she finally asked.

He swallowed the food that was in his mouth and then leaned back in his chair with a sigh as he finally looked at her.

“Lottie, I hate that I need to even suggest this, but the farm is struggling. You know that,” he began. “I’m aware that you would rather help me than do anything else, but it's not as profitable as it used to be, not with the drought over the last few years.

“The stream that runs along the edge of the farm is drying up and it’s only March. I don't know how much longer we will be able to stay here,” he admitted. “Besides, I still feel like a woman shouldn’t have to work as hard as a man would on this land.”

“What are you saying?” she pressed, wishing that he would just come out and say what was on his mind.

What did getting married have to do with how much it was or wasn’t raining? And didn’t he realize how hard she had needed to work in the factory?

Yes, it had been a different type of work, but it had still been difficult. She remembered many times coming home so exhausted from her hours at the factory she had been too tired to eat dinner before falling into bed, only to get up the next morning and do the same thing again.

She had never told her father, but she’d hated working at the factory. Ellen and her mother had, too, but they had willingly worked so they could help contribute to the finances and not lose the farm.

“I'm saying I might need to sell the farm. This is why I'm suggesting that you get married. Aston is a big enough city that I'm sure you could find someone who would be willing to marry you.”

Lottie pushed her bowl of stew away, suddenly not feeling a bit hungry.

Her father seemed to be telling her it would be perfectly understandable for her to accept any man who wanted to marry her, no matter who it was. He just wanted her out of his life so he could make his own plans for the farm.

Tears pricked her eyes, and she bit her lip to keep them from falling.

Just the fact that her father was suggesting she get married was another sign of how much he had changed since the loss of her mother and Ellen. Before the tragedy, he would have never encouraged her to marry just for the sake of it.

“Just consider the idea.” He took a last bite of stew and then turned away.

A few minutes later, the screen door banged behind him as he went outside to do the evening chores.

Lottie sat at the kitchen table for a long time. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and this time she did nothing to stop them.

She wished so badly that things were the way they used to be. She missed her mother and sister so much. And as much as she hated to admit it, she felt like she had also lost her father.

He was a shell of the man he used to be.

She thought about her father's suggestion, but even if she agreed with his plan, none of the men she was acquainted with in Aston would want to marry her. She was too outspoken, too rough around the edges.

She also wanted to marry for love, not convenience. One of the things she did remember about her parents was the deep love they had for each other. She wanted the same or not to marry at all.

Besides, there was no one out there who would want someone like her.

She thought of the different business owners she had interacted with in Aston that day. Most of them were patronizing toward her, and one had even teased her for even thinking he'd want to hire her.

No one wanted a simple farm girl to work for them. Even if she was willing to marry, those types of men were not what she could imagine for her future.

It didn't take long to clean up the supper dishes. Her father hadn't come in yet from doing the evening chores and the sun was still shining in the west, but she went into her room for the night.

She just couldn't deal with the unspoken expectations her father now had of her.

But even hours after the sun had set, Lottie couldn't fall asleep. All she could think about was her father's suggestion.

If she didn’t marry, she would need to find a job, one way or another. Her father had given her the definite message without saying the actual words.

Lottie was on her own.

Continue reading here!